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CIPHERS

BY

ELLEN OLNEY KIRK

AUTHOR OF "THE STORY OF MARGARET KENT," "SONS AND DAUGHTERS," "QUEEN MONEY," "WALFORD," ETC.

"Ciphers forget their integer"

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
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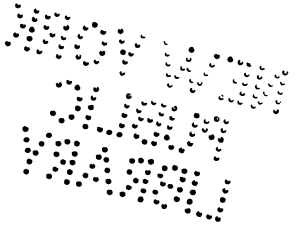

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CIPHERS.

"Ciphers forget their integer."

I.

THERE was just that touch of unexpectedness in Mrs. Lee Childe's sudden reappearance in New York society which impresses the imagination. During the four years of her widowhood people had asked, "Is Milly never coming back to settle down with her father-in-law?" Then the time had arrived when she was ready to shape out a new career for herself, and all the world was taken by surprise. This afternoon in November she had been standing since three o'clock receiving the stream of guests who had promptly answered her card of invitation, and although it was now past five hardly a visitor had left the house. Each seemed eagerly anxious to remain within sight or hearing of the hostess, and an inch of standing-room was grudgingly contested to new-comers. A conjunction of circumstances had made Mrs. Lee Childe's life exceptional, and not a few were ready to say to-day that she herself was exceptional. The crowd was composed chiefly of women, and they watched and

listened, studying her wit and beauty as a veteran general studies his enemy's strength and position. There were charming old ladies, who, having fought their own battles more or less successfully, might now with magnanimity assist at a younger woman's triumph. There were matrons, with daughters of their own who would find a rival in the youthful widow. There were experienced society girls, who coveted this easy vantage-ground held by a woman hardly beyond their own age. Then there were the débutantes who gazed with open-eyed amazement at the phenomenon of a woman so consummately adult as to have been married and to have lost her husband, yet who not only assumed the advantages of youth, but towards whom every eligible man in the room was pressing with a definiteness of intention which might easily have rankled in the breasts of these charming young creatures, to whom the good things of the opening season rightfully belonged.

"Evidently," the chaperons were saying to each other, "Milly Clyde has refused to grow old."

"She is beautiful, magnificent, enchanting," said Paul Sécor. "I have always observed that widowhood gives a fresh lease of youth and beauty. Besides, I suppose she takes the family 'elixir' regularly."

This was an old joke, but some witticisms enjoy perennial freshness. To know what and whom to laugh at, as well as when to do so, is the surest test of knowledge of the world. For in society,

from reasons of state, so much that is actually dull and absurd has to be taken with profound seriousness, so much pettiness must be accepted as immeasurable bigness, so many balloons to which a pin prick of ridicule would be fatal require to be inflated by the bated breath of reverence, that we need even to smile warily. But it had always been admissible to laugh at "Dr. Pardee's Elixir of Life," which was the source of Milly Childe's wealth.

Nine years before, when Lee Childe, the most exclusive, the most fastidious of men, had married Emily Briggs, co-heiress with her uncle to one of the most successful patent medicines of the last half century, society had exclaimed much after the fashion of Mme. de Sévigné over a famous mésalliance of her epoch; not however but that all the world was ready to applaud Mrs. Rutherford Childe's cleverness in securing the Pardee millions for her son. Everybody rushed to see the bride who, already fabulously rich in dower, would all the time go on receiving nobody knows how many thousands of yearly income from the elixir, which still bubbled perennially from its original spring, rejuvenating the human race.

Mrs. Lee Childe, née Emily Briggs, proved to be a girl of eighteen, so youthful in face, figure, and manner as to seem two years younger. She wore the gowns of her splendid trousseau with an air of being oppressed by their weight. She was slight to fragility, pale, with great frightened eyes

often on the point of tears, which after a single questioning glance at a stranger were apt to hide themselves under their lids. Her voice was so low as to be almost inaudible. When pointedly addressed she looked at her husband or her mother-in-law, seeming eager to escape the least social ordeal. Friends, even acquaintances, she made none.

Mrs. Rutherford Childe was a brilliant woman with an easy habit of supremacy, and she carried her timid little daughter-in-law through a season or two, but she was mortal and did not long survive the reëstablishment of the family fortune. After her death, her husband, who had spent the last twenty years going up and down the face of the earth, gave up his wanderings and resumed his long vacant place in the Childe ménage. By this time Lee, who had gradually detached himself from actual life, and trusted to his mother to shape events, grew weary of pretending to be well, gave himself up to chronic invalidism, and in two years died of heart disease.

Soon after this event, Emily, or Milly as she was called by all the Lee and Childe connection, which forms a considerable fraction of social New York, went into the country. There had been a singular dearth of gossip about her in these four years. Thus to society at large a new planet had swum into its ken, and it could hardly be wondered at if people looked at each other with a wild surmise. The traditions of her introduction

to society nine years before were the traditions of a failure. Even those who best remembered her would have said she was a plain little creature, without style, without conversation, without chic. Evidently it was necessary to collect fresh facts to make fresh inferences. This was a handsome woman, a woman of distinction, with an air of being used to meet the world on equal terms and decide for herself what things in life she accepted or rejected.

"I can't quite define her," said Paul Sécor, as questions and comments began to stir like a breeze. "Is it that she is actually a beautiful woman, or is she simply well dressed?"

Certainly all the women were ready to answer that her gown was nothing in particular. It might be called half mourning, gray with fluffy white effects about the throat, and its only audacity was that it proclaimed a pretty woman's challenge to be beautiful in spite of colors which would make most wearers resemble Lot's wife. In her manner probably lay the trick of a certain charm she undoubtedly possessed. She had always had these same superb gray eyes, but had only now learned to use them to look at the world in an honest, innocent way, yet with a sort of dreaminess. One could not quite understand what one saw in those eyes. Her glance and smile together showed plenty of mother-wit and a turn for humor. She carried herself well, was spontaneous, natural, with a soft womanly witchery. Yet it was evident that she held her sympathy a little in reserve; was resolved to be

natural, with an arch, bright, womanly way. She did not perhaps always give her sympathies full sway, but seemed resolute always to be herself.

Indeed, mere beauty would have been unsatisfactory, ineffective, under the ordeal imposed to-day upon Mrs. Lee Childe, who, although surrounded by a group of ladies receiving with her, by her own unaided glow put out all minor lights. It was in her audacity, in her cleverness, in her tone where lay her triumph. She triumphed indeed in not triumphing at all, for this event of her return which had startled all New York evidently seemed to her nothing in particular.

By half past five the tide was at its full, and Holly Ruff and his friend Sidney Breck, who were the last to arrive, could not advance a step beyond the threshold of the drawing-room. Ruff was a slender man of medium height, with a dark, pale, rather handsome face, his features well-cut, and his black hair setting off a fine forehead. The pose of his head suggested a habit of fixed attention to the subject before him, and his alert critical air was perhaps heightened by his eyeglasses, through which his eyes seemed to burn. His companion, a bright-eyed, boyish-looking fellow, was much his junior, and evidently looked to him for orders. The group now gathered before Mrs. Childe was within the range of the eyes and ears of the newcomers. It was composed chiefly of men. To begin with, there was the well oiled and accurately poised weathercock, Whiley Norreys, a well made,

carefully dressed man, with a bland air showing an absolute knowledge of the art of pleasing, and a smooth deliberate voice, which in spite of its soft intonations invariably mastered and bore down all that he wished to silence. No man excelled Whiley Norreys in the art of foretelling from which point passing winds were to blow, and at the present moment the way he stood squarely planted before Mrs. Lee Childe, pointedly addressing his every remark to her, was sufficient to establish her as the success of the season. Then there was Paul Sécor, a tall, handsome man with a soldierly carriage, a long fair moustache, and a pair of half-melancholy, half-laughing blue eyes. There was Archy Laing, the best dancer in New York, the hero of a hundred flirtations, but lacking advancement, and Geddes Poorshaw, a plain, solidly-built fellow with no charm, but the owner of a comfortable fortune.

"If I do not love New York," Mrs. Childe was saying, as Ruff and Sidney Breck stood together under the archway of the door, "it is only because there is nothing to do in New York."

"In the years that you have been away from New York, Mrs. Childe," said Whiley Norreys, "the town has advanced by great strides."

"So I hear, but we know where great strides lead to."

"Not to heaven, Whiley, not to heaven, but the other place," put in Paul Sécor.

"But, my dear Milly," said Mrs. Geddes, "I

can assure you that you will find only too much to do in New York. I come down to breakfast with my bonnet on at nine o'clock, my carriage is already at the door, and that is the way I go on until midnight, — indeed, through the season often three or four hours later. I never have a moment to myself. I often say I am like a clock which is wound up, and goes by some force not its own."

"Of course," said Mrs. Childe, "one might get into a treadmill and grind corn from one year's end to the other; but that is not my notion of a delightful existence."

"You will have plenty of dinners and balls to go to, Mrs. Childe," said Paul Sécor, "and certainly we all hope you will give plenty of dinners and balls. We needed just this one house more to look to for agreeable things. And entertaining is an occupation in itself."

"Entertaining has become one of the fine arts," said Whiley Norreys, with the solemnity of a high priest explaining the rites. "The time, the forethought, the money, the intellect, the original genius, I might say, which are spent in the details which go to make up the sum of a highly civilized dinner or supper, might, if differently expended, carry on the affairs of a small kingdom. Every new season brings its demand for some clever device, some new kink, some cunning caprice of fashion. The mere bric-à-brac, if I may use the term, of any sort of social occasion, calls for skill, knowledge, research, above all, supreme good taste.

This is what gives modern society its subtle aroma of elegance."

"Good gracious!" said Milly; "I fear you will never find any subtle aroma of elegance about my dinners, if I venture to give any after this initiation. I shall simply say to my man, 'So many people are coming on such a night. Have plenty of flowers, but not a jungle; plenty of light, but veil it.' Then there is always some good-natured person to settle the distribution of guests. If I thought I had to trouble myself about those trifles I should return to my lodge in the wilderness without loss of time."

Whiley Norreys shook his head, smiling sadly; a murmur ran round.

"Is n't she saucy?" said Georgina Hurst to Paul Sécor.

"I like it. She jingles her money in our faces. I enjoy the jingle even if it is other people's money."

"Do I like dinners?" Mrs. Childe was now saying. "One must eat, and it is agreeable to eat in company with one's friends. But I am not a Strasbourg goose, and I can only eat a certain amount. I hate made dishes and I loathe wines, and if there are too many courses, and the people who sit near me do not amuse me, why, of course I do not enjoy dinners, — quite the contrary."

"You are too young to have learned how to dine," said Whiley Norreys with tender patronage. "You like balls better."

"The few balls I have attended impressed me as mournful to a degree. Still, I do like the music."

"Don't you dance?" inquired Archy Laing.

"Not in company. Often when I am in good spirits I execute a pas seul, but at balls, even if I felt the requisite élan, which I very much doubt, I might surprise people too much."

"Our balls have grown as dull as ditch-water," said Paul Sécor. "The novelty we need is to have Mrs. Lee Childe dance a pas seul."

"At one time of my life," observed Whiley Norreys, "balls seemed to me the only rational end of existence. Now that I am a trifle too heavy in weight to enjoy making a teetotum of myself balls take another aspect. There is no such opportunity for a woman to display a beautiful gown."

"Oh, Mr. Norreys, think of a show window and a figure revolving by machinery," said Milly Childe.

"Then a ball offers such an unlimited opportunity for conversation," said Whiley Norreys, shaking his head at this frivolity.

"I had no idea there was any conversation in New York nowadays," said Milly.

"Set up a salon, my dear," said Mrs. Geddes. "You will find that people talk very cleverly, not perhaps in the Chateaubriand fashion, but every epoch has its own topics."

"What is talked about in this epoch?"

"Music seems to be one of the great subjects."

"I suppose you mean the German opera?"

"But do you not like the German opera?"

"Immensely, — that is, until people explain it to me."

"Evidently, Mrs. Childe, you don't begin to appreciate the boon of a few definite ideas on a subject," said Paul Sécor. "Music used to be a melodious but inarticulate voice out of the blue; it made one sentimental, filled one with hankerings after one knew not what. Nowadays we sum it all up in a sentence: 'Thum, thum, thum,' — 'that is the giant's motif,' we say to each other. 'Diddle diddle, diddle,' — 'that is the lump of pure gold at the bottom of the Rhine.' Wagner has been a distinct boon to society."

"There was never a period in the world, Mrs. Childe," said Whiley Norreys, "when the best society was so well equipped with succinct opinions. There is no vagueness. It is absolutely essential to be able to talk on every sort of topic: European politics, the latest novels, Shakespeare, Browning" —

"It quite makes one long for the dark ages, does it not?" said Milly.

"At the houses I visit," put in Archy Laing, "we don't discuss music or literature, but simply gossip. Confess you like to talk about people, cousin Milly."

"Of course I like to talk about people. It is the relish of life, the pepper in the stew. But oh,

what a dangerous indulgence! Even when I hold my tongue I am apt to make enemies at the rate of one a day. If I were to open my lips — but there is Mr. Ruff wedged in at the door! Will somebody please move and let him come and speak to me."

She advanced a step, holding out her hand eagerly. The crowd parted and gave way to the late comers, who bore their sudden preëminence as best they might. Holly Ruff was comparatively well known, but his companion was an utter stranger except to the Poorshaws, who, when everybody said, "Breck? Sidney Breck? Who is he?" replied, "Why, don't you know? He is the architect who designed our cottages at Newport."

The interruption was needed to break the charm; somebody discovered that it was past six o'clock, and a move was made at once. Mrs. Childe took the ebb as she had taken the flow, with easy good humor, which still held its own and conceded nothing.

"Oh, yes, I am always at home. I shall have Saturdays put on my cards, but I dare say I shall never go out. What is there to go out for? It is so hard to manage it. If one longs for a drive one has to think of it two hours before, or sit waiting with one's wraps on until the fit for going out is over. Oh, yes, I 'm certain to be at home."

"Am I going to the Bellews' silver wedding? Perhaps so, but I always insist that after a woman has been married twenty-five years she ought to be

allowed the privilege of honorable retirement on a pension."

"Of course I 'll come to your coming-out tea, my dear. And let me see, what can I do for you? Shall it be a pink or a yellow luncheon?"

"I have looked at that gown, Fanny, and all the afternoon I have been dying of envy. *Quel chic!*"

"Oh, as to papa, — the moment I told him everybody was coming to-day, he retired into private life. No doubt he has spent his time in washing his hands and saying mournfully that Milly does not know what she is doing."

"Don't go yet," she had found time to say to Holly Ruff; and he had walked down the thinning rooms with his companion, and, crossing the hall, entered the library.

"Well, Sidney, what did you think of her?" he asked.

"I admired her," said Breck.

"But did not like her?"

"I had no time to think about my individual feelings. I simply was delighted to have the chance to watch her and listen to her."

"She struck you perhaps as more acute than amiable."

"She took away my breath at times."

"That is her society manner," said Ruff, with the tone of a man who has mastered the subject. "The truth about Milly Childe is that she is half a dozen women in one. You see she is not a happy woman, has never been a happy woman. Of all

that crowd pressing about her not one knew her. I myself am the only intimate friend she has in New York."

"You were saying," murmured Breck, "that there were half a dozen women in her. I am curious to know what you meant."

"I will tell you," said Ruff, speaking always with the deliberate consciousness of a scientist who has reduced his observations to exact formula. "There is the woman who is ambitious to shine in society, and the woman who laughs at society; the refined womanly woman, with all the modesty, reserve, and dread of daylight which charms us, and yet the woman of wit who is carried away, easily outsteps bounds, and is too reckless of displeasing; the woman of intellect, the woman of heart; the cynical woman, and the intensely romantic woman. She went through an experience which utterly disenchanted her, yet she is as fresh as a girl. She is completely disillusioned, yet her bright inquisitive mind is alert for every new idea, and she possesses as acute and discriminating an intellect as any woman I know."

"And she lives here," said Breck, looking about the rich room, at the deep cushioned chairs before the fire burning in the grate; at the reading-tables with their carefully shaded lights; at the books everywhere, on shelves, in cases, and strewn about amid sheaves of periodicals. The sense of quiet and seclusion, of opportunity for leisure, reading, and thought, was refreshing to him after the gay

bustle and idle chattering of the parlors. While they stood for a moment in silence, a slender white hand drew aside the *portière* which separated the two rooms, and an elderly man appeared. This was Rutherford Childe, father-in-law of the woman whom Ruff had been describing. He was past sixty, but had reached the downward slope of life without losing the delicate good looks of his youth. His hair had whitened, but it gave added distinction to his chiseled features and fire to his dark eyes. His manner was peculiarly gentle; he was not easily stirred; he took life quietly, had always hated scenes, and for that reason perhaps had never been so happy as since his brilliant, energetic, domineering wife had dropped out from his circle. After his son's death he had lived on in the old Childe mansion, which had at the time of Milly's marriage passed into her possession. His life was not desolate; his daughter-in-law came and went, and he had a circle of friends of whose life he made, he believed, an essential part.

"Have the women gone away?" he asked, as he shook hands with Ruff.

"They are going."

"Thank God!" said Mr. Childe devoutly. "Milly arrived Friday with half a mind to sail for Liverpool next day. 'Why not settle down comfortably for the winter with me?' I asked her. Then the first thing she did on Monday was to set Mrs. Fletcher and Georgy Hurst making out a visiting list for her. This is the result."

"Very brilliant affair," said Ruff. "Let me introduce Sidney Breck, Mr. Childe. This youngster longed for a glimpse of society, so I took the liberty of bringing him."

"I have had several years of solid comfort," observed Mr. Childe mournfully. "It is something to be fenced off from this world. However, Milly is young. She has not learned the value of peace and quietness. Let us go and see how she has stood it."

They found only a group of five in the parlors: Mrs. Fletcher, a white-haired, dark-eyed, soft-skinned, and still very pretty woman, although not far from sixty, and her two nieces, Mrs. Ferris and Miss Hurst, all cousins of Mr. Childe, who had been helping Milly to receive, besides Whiley Norreys, who always lingered behind to be sure of missing nothing pleasant or profitable.

"Mercy on us," Milly was saying, "are you not all tired to death? For heaven's sake, let us sit down; let us sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the death of kings."

"Live queens are a better subject," said Norreys.

"Why did you not come out before, cousin Rutherford?" said Mrs. Fletcher, addressing Mr. Childe. "You need not pretend not to like society, for we know there is nothing you like half so well."

"That is a very good reason for staying away from a crowded afternoon reception," said Mr. Childe. "Surely you would not invite a gourmand to a feast of bread and butter."

Mrs. Ferris, a blooming young matron, and Miss Hurst, a mature stylish girl, kissed their "cousin Rutherford" and began telling what a success Milly had enjoyed. Never was anything like it. Nobody had been willing to take time to eat or drink. Each alike had had eyes, ears, and open mouths only to watch, listen to, and gape at Milly.

"And everybody was here," remarked Mrs. Ferris in a tone of heartfelt satisfaction.

"Except Mrs. Bernard-North," said Miss Hurst with a note of woe in her voice.

"But then Mrs. Bernard-North never goes to anybody's receptions," Mrs. Fletcher explained soothingly.

"Which is a great advantage to anybody's reception," said Milly. "I am sure that I for one am much obliged to Mrs. Bernard-North."

"She intended to come to-day," Whiley Norreys, whose aunt Mrs. Bernard-North happened to be, hastened to interpose, "but unfortunately just past noon she received a cable despatch announcing that her granddaughter had died in Paris of measles, poor little thing."

"Regular *memento mori*, telegrams, hate 'em like poison," said Mr. Childe. "They always remind me of my wife. She invariably wired on the most trivial pretense, and I finally declined to open her despatches. In fact, when the news of her death came I supposed it to be simply some unnecessary piece of interference on her part, so

flung the envelope in the fire and never heard what had happened until a letter came a fortnight afterwards."

"I always dread opening a telegram lest it should contain some upsetting news," said Mrs. Fletcher. "But one can't put off opening them, for people wire nowadays to tell you they cannot come to dinner, — they even invite one by telegraph. Highly absurd, I think."

Mrs. Lee Childe had moved across the room to speak to Breck. His face struck her as exceptional. It was a beautiful boy's face, with full forehead and temples, rich tints and brilliant eyes. His cheeks were smooth, apparently beardless; his moustache was a mere line of brown, and turned up slightly at the ends in a foreign fashion. There was strength and decision in the mouth and chin, but the impression he gave was of an ardent alert vitality and a readiness to absorb impressions. As she approached him she said to herself that he could hardly be more than twenty.

"You came at the eleventh hour," she said to him; "but I am glad to see you at my little tea."

"You did not invite me," stammered Breck.

Holly Ruff had followed the hostess.

"I met Breck at the corner," he said, "and he confided to me that he was never at a fashionable tea. I told him I would enlarge his experience, so brought him, trusting to your magnanimity, Mrs. Childe."

She smiled at Breck. He seemed not to have

seen her smile before. "Oh, heavens!" he said to himself.

"I don't consider myself the very glass of fashion," she remarked, "but how do you like this affair as far as it goes?"

"I have not thought about the affair yet," said Breck. "I have been thinking about something else."

"I want to give a tea myself, Mrs. Childe," said Holly Ruff, and he at once proceeded to broach his project. Milly listened, then going back to Mrs. Fletcher told her that Mr. Ruff desired them all to go to his rooms the next day.

"Am I asked?" inquired Whiley Norreys in his favorite attitude, his hands extended, while he bent forward with his head a little on one side.

Of course Whiley Norreys was asked, being a person whom Holly Ruff tolerated with the same sheer contempt with which he tolerated a large proportion of the human race.

II.

An hour later Sidney Breck was on his way uptown to fulfill his deferred errand. He had partaken of a sort of high tea at the Childes', then when the ladies had set out for the opera he had parted from Holly Ruff and gone on as if in a dream, completely under the charm of the experience. He was of the age and of the temperament which take vivid impressions, and the thought of Mrs. Childe dominated him. He knew more beautiful women; Miss Rivera, whom he was now on his way to see, possessed more actual beauty, but he admired Mrs. Childe. He longed to study the secret of her, sitting, watching, and listening to her for a month. Certainly, if not beautiful, she had points of rare perfection. He longed to model her head and neck and catch the trick of that turn of the throat; there was something wonderful about that pose,— it would give rare distinction to a bust. Not that Breck was a sculptor; he only dabbled in clay occasionally when he wished to express some idea that haunted him. At first he had been struck by the ease with which Mrs. Childe received universal homage. There was an air of good-natured amusement; her smile took the edge off her little audacities. His first impression had been that she was too cultured, too exotic to

be warmly and humanly a woman, just as one feels in looking at an orchid that it is not simply a flower. Afterwards, when she addressed him, letting her smile and glance linger on him, he had received a revelation of an influence sweet, caressing, protecting, something purely feminine. He knew little and cared less about the great world. He wondered, remembering how Holly Ruff had boasted of his intimacy with Mrs. Lee Childe, whether the two could be engaged. He was in the habit of looking up admiringly to Ruff, who had befriended him. Breck was not a New Yorker; he had been born in Boston, and at the age of seventeen had gone to Paris to study to be a painter; then at the age of twenty-two had returned to America and settled in New York, taking up the profession of architect. For five years now he and Ruff had been almost like brothers.

Arriving in a new quarter of the city, Breck, on leaving the train, turned into a street attractive in its freshness, and ringing at the entrance of a great apartment house he was presently knocking at a door in the fifth story. He was admitted on the instant by a bright-looking little woman, dressed in a fantastic tea-gown, who held out her hand and welcomed him cordially. This was Mrs. Hugh Rivera.

"Nita is at home. Indeed, you do not need to be told that," she said in response to his inquiry, as she ushered him into a small room crowded with tables, elaborately cushioned chairs and divans,

hung with curtains and portières, while the walls were covered if not enriched by a medley of plates, pictures, and fans. Into one corner was crammed an upright piano, and before the instrument sat a girl carelessly striking a note here and there as an accompaniment to "Che faro senza Eurydice?" while she hummed the air repeating the cry "Eurydice" with every variety of passionate inflection.

"Here is Mr. Breck, Anita," said Mrs. Rivera.

The girl wheeled on the music-stool and started up.

"Oh, is it you?" she exclaimed, with an air of intense satisfaction. "I was just trying the song you sent me."

In spite of the intimate salutation the two bowed to each other with that air of youthful reserve which betrays a fear of transgressing polite forms.

"I have brought you the tickets for the symphony concert," said Breck. "My friend, Mr. Ruff, managed to get them for me."

Mrs. Rivera, after hovering for a moment about the parlor, putting minor details to rights with swift birdlike touches, withdrew to the adjoining compartment, where she sat down anew to her work within call of her three children asleep in an inner room of the crowded little flat.

Breck had for some months been a frequent visitor. Hugh Rivera was a draughtsman in the office of Champion & Breck, and had asked the junior partner to call and give his opinion of his sister's voice, for Anita was just entering upon the

study of music. Breck had at once become interested in the girl, who was beautiful, full of artistic ambition, and thoroughly discontented with her present possibilities. All his sympathies were alert at this glimpse of genius groping in search of its true aims.

For Miss Rivera's was a harp of many strings, and at the outset it had been no easy matter to decide which of her five talents she should spend and which suffer to dwindle under a napkin. She had primarily decided to be a Mrs. Browning, and had turned off hundreds of verses deficient only in those minor requisites of technique which editors with meagre-souled sympathies insist upon as essential. A few disappointments sufficed to prove to Anita that appreciation of poetry is one of the lost arts, and since the novel is the true vehicle of nineteenth century thought and passion, she wrote one which was to run through a hundred editions. Unluckily it failed to do so. But it had only been a means to an end; what she had aspired to do was to make money to support her in some art-centre, for she was now determined to be an artist. Her brother opened a door by asking her to live with him, and accordingly, two years before, she had come to New York with a portfolio full of original sketches, which were to be the delight of the masters and the despair of her fellow-students. The committee to which the sketches were confided admitted that they showed talent, but was unanimous in declaring that the artist had not been

taught to draw, and must begin with a full course of the "preparatory antique." The "preparatory antique" was very dull for Anita, who felt warm blood stirring in her veins and longed for swift action and instantaneous results.

Probably her love of color was partly a matter of temperament. Her grandfather, a native of Porto Rico, the descendant of a French nobleman, who had emigrated during the revolution, had been sent to Northampton, Massachusetts, to be educated, and had married in that place, dying just after his wife gave birth to a son. This graft of French and Spanish blood upon New England stock had been an almost forgotten incident until in the second generation this girl was born, who alone out of eight children was endowed with those distinctive attributes of physique, temperament, and mind which we call foreign. She possessed remarkable beauty with all the rich and delicate coloring of a French creole; long eyes with wonderful lids, superb contours, graceful movement, hands and feet after a rare model, and besides these physical endowments, ardent artistic tastes, a pliancy to artistic impressions, and an intense ambition to conquer the world by her gifts. She liked to paint, but she soon heartily detested the "preparatory antique," and declared she saw neither logic nor reason in sitting down before and worshiping a hideous plaster foot without a single curve of beauty in it. Her fellow pupils shrugged their shoulders at her work and occasionally tried

to set her right, but the masters were merciless; all she did was declared to be out of proportion, out of plumb; she had no feeling for the outline.

At this moment, when she was crushed with the mortification of her defeat, it happened that Contarini, a fashionable music-master, heard her sing a little German ballad, and, struck by the richness and dramatic quality of her voice, he asked her to become his pupil for a few months, that he might decide what possibilities lay behind that fine middle register. At the end of three months he besought her to go on for a year, — two years. It was a labor of love to teach her; it was, besides, a religious duty to foster so beautiful a talent.

Anita felt in herself that strength of youth which makes it seem an easy matter to mould one's destiny. Emerson observes that we must read history actively and not passively, considering our own lives the text and this the commentary, and she had always obeyed this behest implicitly. "Shall I write poems like Mrs. Browning's or Jean Ingelow's? — novels after the example of George Eliot or the author of Jane Eyre? Shall I be a female Millet or Meissonier?"

Thus when Signor Contarini told her that she possessed a mezzo-soprano voice of unusual compass and flexibility, and of a timbre almost unknown since Garcia retired from the stage, and that all she required was patient and docile study, Anita instantly decided that the mantle of Patti, which of necessity must one day fall, should de-

scend upon her own shoulders. Of course she had lost time, — she was now about twenty-one years of age, but lost time could be made up by working with superhuman energy. This past summer she had been studying under Contarini's direction in the little mountain nook where he made his villeggiatura. He had been very sanguine when he undertook the enterprise of developing Miss Rivera into a great cantatrice. He was still sanguine, but he clearly recognized the fact that there were lions in the path. Anita's voice showed the rarest possibilities; the fault, strange to say, was of the ear. This fault he had felt certain he might, by indefatigable training, correct. He had watched, tested, experimented, finally believed that he understood the secret of it. It lay, partly, he declared, in the conflict of the two temperaments: that is to say, when she sang false, it was a matter of physique, intellect, nerves, — above all, nerves. What she lacked was discipline, — the discipline resulting from a single intense dominating idea. Her will was like a wind blowing where it listeth, delighting in its vagaries and exulting in its chimeras. When she slept well, kept herself fresh, did not over-eat or strain her powers in any way, — above all, when she was serenely happy, she sang like an angel. The one thing necessary was to keep her single-hearted, happy, and well.

Sidney Breck, himself an ardent lover of music, with a faultless ear, had never been over-sanguine concerning Miss Rivera's chances. But he had

gone through his own hard struggle, and knew something about artistic cravings for free play for one's powers, and she interested him. The belief was sometimes forced upon him that she was hopelessly wrong in her choice of a career. But a girl's failure is not so tragical as a man's failure, since a happy marriage may more than make it up to her. When he sometimes said to himself, "She never can be the great singer she is ambitious to be," he half smiled, for many thoughts drift through the mind of a young fellow.

"Whether I can sing for you to-night, Mr. Breck, I do not know," said Anita. "I wish you could have been with me this afternoon. Mr. Contarini lost his head entirely. I heard him jumping about while I was singing, and was afraid at first that he was tearing his hair over a false note, and presently would fall upon me and rend me in pieces. But no; when I finished he clapped his hands. 'You shall go to Paris, to Milan, for one, two, tree years,' said he. 'But fairst you shall show zem here in New York what I can do. I will take a hall, — I will take ze opera-house, I will hire ze orchestra, — I care not for ze aixpense, I will pay ten t'ousand dollar, but you shall be brought out in New York and show them what I have done, what I can do.'"

"I am delighted," said Breck in a glow of exultation.

"But to-morrow," pursued Anita, "very likely he may be in a different mood, and just when I

am gathering myself up for it, I shall hear him fling over a chair, then he will jump on a sofa as if he meant to break its every spring, and he will put his fingers in his ears and say, 'Oh, ze mighty, ze zounds, ze sacr-r-r-rr!'"

"Oh, no, no, you are over the threshold now. You do well to-day and you will do better to-morrow."

"Perhaps so," said Anita, with a little nod and smile; "but I do wish, Mr. Breck, you had heard me this afternoon. Mr. Contarini told me when I came away that I was sailing off into the blue, that he must hold fast to the tail of the kite lest I should escape him altogether."

"I started to come here at five o'clock," said Breck, "but just as I was leaving the house Holly Ruff went past, and as he was going to a great reception" —

"Mrs. Lee Childe's?" asked Anita eagerly.

"Oh, you know her then?"

"Oh dear, no, I know nobody in New York; but Maddy and I always read the society news, and we saw that she was to have a reception to-day."

"Maddy," otherwise Mrs. Hugh Rivera, represented to Breck all that he wished a woman to avoid.

"I suppose everything is in the papers," he remarked with a shrug; "but why when there is anything else to read one should occupy one's self with stuff of that sort, — at least, when it does not personally concern one, — I can't understand."

"It does concern me," said Anita. "It gives

me knowledge of the world, and besides, I say to myself that there will come a time when the papers will be full of paragraphs about me."

"All right," said Breck, throwing back his head and laughing; "I promise to read all they say about you."

"But about Mrs. Lee Childe's reception?" questioned Anita. "The papers said she was only twenty-six years old, a widow, and worth millions upon millions."

"Twenty-six, — yes, I should have said she was about that age," murmured Breck.

"Did you go with Mr. Ruff?"

"Yes. He is always like the centurion, and when he says 'come,' I come, and when he says 'go,' I go."

"Was it delightful?"

"Mrs. Lee Childe is delightful. If you think you ever saw a perfectly charming woman just dismiss that idea and get another. Nothing less than Mrs. Lee Childe is charming."

"But why is she so charming? Is she so beautiful?"

"Beautiful? I don't know whether she is positively beautiful."

"Was she exquisitely dressed?"

"Dressed? Oh, no doubt; I did not observe."

"Was the house beautiful?"

"I only noticed the library, which was large and quiet."

"You don't seem to have brought away very clear ideas," said Anita.

"One does not sum up a woman like that in a sentence," said Breck. "It may be art, but it is such consummate art it seems like nature. When I first heard her talking to a crowd of men I was afraid she ran after brilliance too much, but I saw afterwards that she is really more simple, more natural, more direct than other people."

Anita gave him a bright glance, but his words had reminded her of something else.

"I forgot to tell you," she remarked, "that when I went in this afternoon, Mr. Contarini said 'You weel sing well to-day.' Afterwards he explained what he meant." She jumped up and with raised forefinger mimicked the Italian. "'You do not look so praity as usual. You are not so neat, so well-dressed. You have not been t'inking about yourself to-day, but about your music. Ze troot' is, Mees Rivera, ze coquette in you too often spoils ze artiste. Zere is war between ze real and ze ideal. You geeve your best am-bee-she-on not to your art, but to your gown, your gloves, your shoes.'"

"The impertinent puppy! Does he constitute himself your father-confessor?"

"Indeed he does. He is forever telling me there are four things absolutely required to make a good voice: the throat, the stomach, the heart, the brains. He says I cannot be a great singer unless I am a good woman and a great woman and a well woman; that I must be willing to fast like a knight before he goes into battle for the first time."

"That is true enough. Life is a perpetual fast and vigil for anybody who wishes to accomplish anything in this world."

"I do not need to confess my sins, for he sees through me invariably," pursued Miss Rivera. "He finds out all my little evasions of duty. He knows that I do all sorts of things to make money; that when I ought to be resting after using my voice I am painting sachets and pin-cushions and decorating menus and dinner cards."

"You ought not to attempt that outside work. It takes away your devotion to your prime object."

"But I must have some money. They send me only two hundred a year from home. They can hardly spare that. Besides, I like to do those pretty things." Starting up, she crossed the room with her light, pretty movement, and, opening a drawer, brought a handful of cards and bits of silk and satin, on which she had sketched in pure pale shades of color a bough of leaves and flowers straggling across a corner, or cluster of peach blossoms, or other affectations of Japanese art borrowed from the fan and the cup.

"Very pretty, very pretty indeed," said Breck, hastily. "You color very well."

"Those are all done without any models, with a few strokes of the brush," said Anita in triumph.

"Beware of the conventional," he murmured.

"That is why I follow the Japanese school," said Anita. "It is wholly unconventional."

He laughed, but did not reply, and said presently, —

"All the same you must reflect that one has only so much strength, and that for success in any career one must concentrate all one's powers and faculties."

"As soon as I am launched I shall have plenty of money, and there will be no need of such pot-boilers," she returned. "I shall not be compelled to eke out my supply of handkerchiefs by washing them myself and drying them on a pin. I shall not have to mend my gloves endlessly."

"I know the look Contarini likes to see in your face," said Breck; "it is that not of a pretty, self-conscious girl, but of a priestess just off her tripod and all alive with her inspiration."

"What chance have I to feel inspiration here?" said Anita. She was standing before her visitor; and now, glancing into the next room and discovering that it was empty, in a low voice but with passionate vehemence she poured out the story of her hindrances and vexations. "I cannot even practice in peace. Sometimes the children are left for hours under my sole charge, and even when Maddy is here she thinks there can be no harm in their running in and out. I am cramped and thwarted in every way. I sometimes wonder that I can sing at all, I am so irritated, so bored, so depressed. Good conditions are essential to good art. Artists ought not to be obliged to live with their families."

"You may have heard how Patti and Malibran" —

"That was musical education. All that they

had to bear was in the line of artistic discipline, progress, development. But when one's nearest relations are actually indifferent to one's chief objects, when family life means worry, sordid economies, scrimped meals, — for Mr. Contarini says I require to be well fed with good soups and juicy meats " —

" You do not look as if you suffered from any meagre, hunger-bitten diet," interposed Breck, laughing. " I have often told you you should leave bonbons alone."

She shook her finger at him archly.

" I know," he conceded, " that twice I tempted you, but that was before I realized that a singer can put an enemy into her mouth which steals away her voice. I shall never tempt you in that way again."

" I shall not be tempted. Henceforth I promise to devote myself to art. If I do not succeed it will be art itself that is ungrateful."

" You are too impatient. You expect to accomplish miracles. Nowadays miracles only follow tedious processes."

" But I am almost twenty-one, and a singer's lease of power is so short. Nature herself fixes a limit, and after a woman is thirty-five she has lost something. Think of it, only fourteen or fifteen years for me! How much has to be put into that time! "

Breck listened, half touched, half amused. She was so young and so pretty, and her earnestness

deepened her beauty and her charm. And possibly after all she would realize all her dreams. There was somewhere, somehow, a touch of genius in the girl, and although she made mistakes there was none of the crude stumbling of the tyro in anything she attempted. And although mediocrities sometimes have everything their own way for a time, genius knows how to hold its own, when it does really exist. Perhaps the chief stumbling-block in the way of Breck's belief in her ultimate success was the fact that Miss Rivera's love for art rested as it were on her love for herself.

"Don't let us forget music in the musician," he said finally. "I want you to try '*Che faro.*'"

"I hardly think it suits my voice," returned Anita.

"It is one of the dozen great songs of the world. It is a pleasure even to hear it sung badly."

"Oh, thanks. If you expect me to sing it badly it is safe to disappoint you by not singing it at all."

He nevertheless prevailed upon her to try the aria, which she did sing so badly that she was indignant with him.

"I told you," she exclaimed, "that it was of no use for me to attempt it. Mr. Contarini would be displeased to hear that I gave way to anybody's urgency when I knew that I might fail. He says a voice is not a machine. One must not fight against nature."

"Of course he is right," said Breck, amused by the spirit with which the girl turned upon him to rend him for her own failure. "But. I am always longing to hear certain songs, and some of them are hard to sing and nobody sings them. Music is unlike all the other arts; there must always be an interpreter. Just think what it is to have the 'Adelaide' voiceless, forgotten! Who sings the 'Pietà Signore' nowadays? Certain songs haunt me, waylay me, seem to call upon me to deliver them from the darkness and silence."

He pulled himself up and pretended to laugh at his own earnestness.

> "I cannot sing the old songs now,
> It is not that I deem them low;
> 'T is that I can't remember how
> They go,"

he quoted comically, "Not however that Calverley told the truth, for nobody who ever in his life loved a song can forget it."

A sudden wish assailed him himself to sing "*Che faro senza Eurydice?*" and with a laughing glance at Anita, he took the seat from which she had just risen, struck the opening notes with a firm free touch, then sang through the aria in a mellow tenor voice.

She gazed at him in astonishment, even interrupting him in one of the pauses of the air to exclaim, —

"I had no idea that you could sing."

He went on to the end without seeming to hear her.

"I had no idea you could sing, Mr. Breck," she reiterated. "You have a wonderful voice. It was unkind to deceive me in this way."

"Deceived you? Did I ever tell you I did not sing? But then I never do sing nowadays except perhaps to hum an air while I am dressing. I have not sung in this way for years."

"But your voice is a delightful one."

"Nonsense! I have never had any training. I have an intense love for music, but my mother discouraged it, objecting to my becoming 'a musical man,' as she expressed it. So I sing without knowledge, just as I play, catching everything by ear alone. Now that we are talking about it, Miss Rivera," he went on laughing, for it had excited him to sing, "I will tell you something I never even told Alice. When I came to New York six years ago I was rather a broken-hearted fellow, for I had given up painting and tied myself down to what seemed then the veriest drudgery. It was in the summer time, and I was getting a home ready for my sister, who had just lost her husband and her three children; but meanwhile they were in the country, and I was quite alone and hardly knew a soul in New York. The weather was excessively hot, and in the evenings the people who were staying in town used to gather on the steps of their houses to catch the coolness of the river breezes. Remember that I was only twenty-two, a crazy youngster! But I used to assume a sort of disguise and sing about the streets. After a few

nights I was expected and waited for. 'Oh, there he is!' I would hear them say. At first they wanted to give me money, but I replied in Italian gibberish that I did not sing for pay, only for love of music."

"You ought to have been a musician, Mr. Breck," said Anita with conviction.

"Contarini would tell you that I am all wrong: that I open my mouth the wrong way, that it is not a voice at all but a trumpet through the nose, or a broken pipe. Moreover, I have not a strong throat, and could never have been a professional. Above all, I had to bone down to some good paying work and earn some money."

"You ought to have told me you could sing," said Anita with feeling. "I thought I knew you so well, when after all I did not know you at all."

"You know everything now," said Breck. "That is the 'finis' at the end of my story, so you may as well forgive me."

"I forgive you," Miss Rivera granted, yielding her little hand to him. "And I am willing to confess besides that you sang charmingly."

Breck took his leave, and on his way down town thought over the girl's naive self-confessions, her little tempers; and perhaps, too, he shrewdly put his finger on a want of sympathy in her character from the way she had received his little story. He recalled Garcia's saying, "D'abord, je suis femme, avec les affections, les devoirs, les idées d'une femme; d'après, je suis artiste." Very pretty; and

of course in a way a woman must postpone everything to fulfill the sacred duties of life before she permits art to dictate to her. Yet in a different way women are apt to put the woman before the artist. He recalled feminine rivalries in Parisian ateliers, and was ready to indulge in masculine cynicisms regarding the rebellious egotisms of the fair sex. Then taking a fairer view, he acknowledged that even men did not invariably succeed in fusing self in the artist.

As he crossed the streets to his lodging, "Eurydice" was still ringing in his ears, but his thoughts had returned to Mrs. Lee Childe. It struck him as a coincidence that his room was just round the corner from the old Childe mansion, which faced Stuyvesant Square. Nothing could be more simple and natural than to stroll on and look up at the windows. The full moon flooded the whole place with light. It was the Indian summer, and the air was balmy with breezes just stirring the tops of the trees, causing the shimmer of moonlight to tremble like a sheet of water ruffled by a sudden disturbance. A soft stifled murmur rose and fell like a regular breath. Breck felt the beauty of the night, the outside silence of the great city, the stir of life within the heart of it. The romantic passion of the song still thrilled him. Why might he not sing it? He leaned against the paling and looked up at the house, where lights burned in the upper windows. *She* was probably there, and he resigned himself to the impulse which half

an hour later he was ready to regard as an insanity.

"*Che faro,*" he began; when his voice was dying on the final note he became aware that the drawing-room window was open and that some one was standing within a few feet of him.

"Please sing that again," a voice said eagerly. "Oh, I beg you to sing that again."

Breck's self-possession, his manners, his very senses seemed suspended by the sudden tremor which seized him. He turned and fled, vanishing out of the pale motionless flood of moonlight into the black opaque shadows.

III.

HOLLY RUFF had hardly exaggerated his unique claim to Mrs. Lee Childe's friendship when he told Sidney Breck that no one else had enjoyed so long and intimate an acquaintance with her. Emily Pardee, the only daughter of the famous Dr. Pardee, had, early in life, married a lawyer named Arthur Briggs, partner of Holly Ruff's father. The little Emily was not born until her parents had reached middle age, and when she was five years old her father died. His partner continued to transact Mrs. Briggs's more personal affairs, and when Mr. Ruff in his turn died, it fell to his son Holly to be of use to the rich and lonely woman, whose life was given up chiefly to charitable enterprises. When Emily lost her mother Holly Ruff was twenty-eight years of age. Mrs. Briggs had implored him to continue his good services to the orphaned girl. A young man can do little for a young woman of sixteen except to fall in love with her and marry her. This Holly Ruff was just making up his mind to be the right course for him to pursue, when Mrs. Rutherford Childe forestalled him by taking possession of the little heiress. Emily Briggs was at this time at the

great boarding-school of Mme. Ségur, just outside New York, and it was Mme. Ségur herself who happened to tell Mrs. Childe about the rich young girl under her charge, who was eating out her heart in grief for her mother. Mrs. Childe had once been associated with Mrs. Briggs in some charitable effort; thus it was a graceful and natural attention to make the acquaintance of Emily, and bring her to her home for Sundays and other holidays. She took the young girl to drive, to flower-shows, to concerts, to see the animals at the Park, and when the right moment came she married her to her son Lee.

Ruff acknowledged to himself that he had been a laggard in love, for he had had a year's start of Mrs. Rutherford Childe. But he philosophically decided that after all it was better not to have hampered his career by the weight of the Pardee millions. Indeed, it was only when Emily Briggs became Mrs. Lee Childe that he found out she was charming. Ruff established himself as her family friend during her husband's lifetime, and after Lee's death he continued his habit of going to the house and was admitted to Mr. Rutherford Childe's small and exclusive family circle. During these four years of her widowhood Milly came and went, sometimes staying but a night, again settling down with her father-in-law for a month. Only Mrs. Fletcher and a few others of the Childe connection succeeded in seeing her; for everybody else who inquired for her at the door the stereotyped

formula went forth: "Mrs. Lee Childe is not at home," "Mrs. Lee Childe does not receive at present," or, "Mrs. Lee Childe is staying in the country."

Ruff easily kept himself informed of the young widow's comings and goings, and without any suspicion of intrusion, was always certain to see her even if she just passed through the town, stopping only for a night. He made himself useful to her in certain ways, giving her lists of forthcoming books, for she was an omnivorous reader, and talking over with her those she had already read. He soon not only grew to understand her tastes, but in a way helped to shape them. Once they encountered abroad, and visited picture galleries together both in Florence and Venice. He could easily flatter himself that he had made himself useful to her, — more than useful, agreeable. What he longed for was to make himself essential.

The day of the reception he laughed in his sleeve at the pretensions of the men whom with quiet jealous instinct he recognized as rival suitors. By this time he knew Milly Childe's likings and dislikings by heart. She possessed a capacity for getting some amusement out of all sorts of people; but at the same time a power of satire, which, even if she habitually kept it within bounds, sometimes escaped her in caustic wit. She hated a bore, she hated a man who veered and tacked and tacked and veered, and of course she would not like Whiley Norreys. Paul Sécor was a spoiled and

superficial creature, who, if he had any heart left after his gay youth, had long since bestowed it on Georgy Hurst, whom he was too poor to marry. Archy Laing was a mere dancing man, while Geddes Poorshaw, with the physique of a pugilist, and brusque, direct manners, which seemed to disclose his innate tendency to assume that the world belonged to him, had nothing to recommend him to a woman of heart and intellect except his name and his money. Of money, Mrs. Lee Childe always had enough and to spare, and she was likely to insist on other qualifications in a second husband.

Who then remained as a possible, a probable, an inevitable choice for the young and lovely widow? Holly Ruff remained. Looking at the subject dispassionately, he could assure himself that he answered her every need. He was exactly of the right age, twelve years her senior. He had made a career for himself as a journalist and literary man. In fact he, and he alone, possessed just the prestige which could give meaning to her millions.

He piqued himself on the unerring tact with which he had on the spur of the moment made up his smart and exclusive little party. Mrs. Childe had once remarked that she was ambitious to climb to the top of one of the tall structures which command a view of the bay, and he had said he should enjoy showing her his own quarters in the Phœnix Building, and prompted by this recollection he had pressed his invitation at an auspicious moment.

He had entertained ladies before, and understood the fâstidious requisitions of the fair sex as well as did David Copperfield when he provided the bottle of lavender water, two wax-candles, a paper of mixed pins, and a pin-cushion for Mrs. Micawber's comfort. In accordance with more modern requirements Ruff had ordered in a profusion of palms and chrysanthemums, while masses of cut roses were set about in bowls.

Little more was needed for the general equipment of the rooms; their design, furnishings, and decorations included everything that the most artistic fancy could suggest. They were the rooms of a very highly civilized man, Ruff had sometimes remarked with complacency, but then he was ready to explain that Sidney Breck had been the sole designer and afterwards his own coadjutor in the arrangement. It was his habit to make "the youngster" useful, and to-day Breck was deputed to meet the ladies on their arrival and to escort them by way of the elevator to the top of the building. The host himself sat at his desk working until the last moment. He was always working, anywhere and anyhow, without fussiness or apparent effort. Not to have worked would have been to lose time, and to lose time was not only to lose money but his knack of keeping abreast with the full movement of the day, chronicling not only the doings of the moment but the prophetic meanings of the moment, so that each coming event seemed to have taken shape and gathered

force logically and in order from his predictions. He was now writing rapidly in a stiff, straight up-and-down hand with the blackest ink, when the janitor's boy, engaged for the occasion, threw open the door. Ruff sprang up, expecting to meet the ladies, but it was Whiley Norreys, who entered with outstretched hand.

"How are you, Ruff?" said he. "I came early. Here, take this." He divested himself of his light top-coat and gave it to the boy. "I said to myself," he went on, with his large bland smile, "Ruff will need a hint or two. It is not every man who knows how to carry off these things."

"Look about the rooms, Norreys!" Ruff returned, "and find fault with whatever does not come up to the mark."

"Of course," observed Norreys, "I am in the swim and I know how these things are done; you are not in the swim and you cannot know how these things are done."

Ruff was hospitable to new ideas, above all to ideas imparted by an expert in any science. He had besides an ample sense of humor, and now good-naturedly sat down, crossed his legs and watched his visitor, who darted about, wheeling the tea-table three inches to the right, and a great arm-chair, relieved against the background made by a rich screen and a beautiful palm, a foot nearer the little table at the left, which was loaded with attractive trifles.

"There," said Norreys in the tone of a man who by his unaided efforts has created a small world, "the effect is good, excellent! It needed just this touch. But on my word, Ruff, you had managed very well. Your rooms have quite an air. If you had turned your attention to these matters at an early age and given up your whole mind to them I can see that you might have developed a genuine social talent."

"I had not the time," answered Ruff, with a peculiar smile; "and besides, Norreys, I have not the intellect."

"Oh, don't say that," said Norreys. "But I take it each man has his own line, and perhaps yours is to be a looker-on and not a chief actor in the world. When your writings come up for mention I always say that what stamps Holly Ruff's work is its being alive with what we call *actualitè*."

"A man who has anything to do with journalism can't afford to be what the French call 'a slayer of dead dogs,'" Ruff replied modestly. "I do try to keep along with current events, — even, if possible, to know what is going to happen."

"The art of life! — that is what makes a leader everywhere," said Norreys. He had taken a chair opposite Ruff, and the two men, each in exactly the same attitude, looked at each other. No two could be in more absolute contrast. Ruff was slender, pale, and, all in black and white, every line clearly cut, gave the impression of an etching. Norreys was large, loosely made, inclined to

corpulency, his coloring florid, his eyes wrinkled at the corners; still his whole figure and mien carried a suggestion of conscious good looks. "I always say to my tailor," he went on, "that I wish to wear not what is, but what is going to be, the fashion. However, catching the thistle-down in air is a feminine trait. I flatter myself that my taste and judgment are correct, usually I might say infallible, yet I have made mistakes. But a clever woman never makes a mistake. She can seize the bead of the first bubble of the champagne, the glint of the coming rainbow. There are here in New York certain women with whom one dines, or whom one goes to see on their reception days, whose gown or table or arrangement of courses shows some eccentricity, which at first blush seems a droll fad, but presently it is discovered that what we had taken as a freak of fancy is the new fashion among the smart set in Vienna, St. Petersburg, or London."

"That shows no special force of originality," Ruff observed, always ready to bristle with negations.

"Who wants originality?" said Norreys. "What we want is thorough good form."

"Still somebody, sometime, must have possessed originality."

"I don't feel certain of that," insisted Norreys. "Society and all social forms are a gradual accretion. There is, of course, a certain —er— er— magnetic force at the centre, as it

were. Everything revolves around this in its own orbit, and what is essential and permanent adheres." He illustrated his interesting scientific hypothesis with appropriate gestures. Then, pleased with this exhibition of his cleverness, he proceeded. "No, Ruff, I always feel that any attempt at originality is dangerous. If innovation begins, where will it end? No, no woman of undoubted position can afford to run any risk of being original. She must use her taste and her intellect in elaborating and perfecting the ideas bequeathed to her by those who in their day have held their position unquestioned and unassailed. There is always plenty of room for development. By the way, Ruff," — here Norreys leaned forward and, sinking his voice, spoke with peculiar emphasis, — "I believe you are an old acquaintance of Mrs. Lee Childe. Candidly, what do you think of her?"

Ruff, as was his near-sighted habit, had taken off his eyeglasses and was examining them with microscopic attention, breathing upon them as a prelude to scouring them with his fresh pocket-handkerchief. "What do you think of her, Norreys?" he replied, beginning to rub painfully. "That is more to the point. You settle such questions."

Still leaning forward, Norreys nodded and shook his forefinger. "Too much wit, too much wit," he said impressively.

"It has sometimes occurred to me," observed

Ruff, without desisting from his occupation, "that she cultivates too assiduously the art of being misunderstood by dull people."

"Exactly," murmured Norreys, with admiration. "You have said it. *Verbum sat.*"

At the same instant he put his finger to his lip and rose. Ruff, still fumbling at his eyeglasses to bestow a final polish, followed his example, but the pause was most unlucky. The whole party had entered simultaneously, — Mr. Childe and his daughter-in-law, Mrs. Fletcher, Mrs. Ferris, Miss Hurst and Sidney Breck. Ruff, blind as a bat without his eyeglasses, was about to put them on when, by an awkward fatality, he contrived to drop them. It was second nature to a born master of ceremonies like Whiley Norreys to throw himself into the breach, when Ruff lost his own opportunity. He darted forward, made a low salaam, as if overcome with delight, then recovered himself and addressed particular greetings to each lady in the exact order of precedence, leading them in turn up to Ruff, whose mishap had brought on an inopportune fit of shyness and driven every idea out of his head.

Perhaps what hindered his recovery of self-possession after Sidney Breck had obligingly picked up and restored his eyeglasses was that Mrs. Lee Childe startled him. Something in her dress, her face, her manner, struck him as quite out of the usual. Was it her wide-brimmed gray hat trimmed with plumes, or the fluffy gray boa

which she wore over her close-fitting gray gown that invested her with this shimmer of silver radiance? or was it that he was dazzled by her evident high spirits? He had sometimes said of her that she had a hundred faces and a hundred manners, each more charming than the other, and certainly something in her aspect to-day, hitherto unseen, took him at his word. She addressed him with unhesitating friendliness, telling him that she and Miss Hurst had been walking together in the Park, and that the beauty of the day had made them linger until almost the very hour he had named for their arrival here; that in order not to be belated they had had the carriage take them to the nearest station of the "elevated." The journey down town had been delightful. Hereafter, Milly declared, she intended spending her entire day in making trips from one end of the island to the other. He had never seen her in such bubbling high spirits. He knew not how to account for the impression she left on him. It was one of his many clever sayings about the fair sex that no man could be quite certain where the gown ended and the woman began; and now the problem perplexed and baffled him. As if his years of intimate habit counted for naught, as if she were a great lady whom he met for the first time, he bowed, said he was most happy, — most happy, he was sure, — smiled inanely, declared it was not late, — in fact, said and looked and did exactly what an hour before he would have sworn he could by no possibility have said or looked or done.

The experience which paralyzed Ruff made Norreys master of the occasion. Indeed, each member of the party, if we except Breck, — generally glad to hold his tongue and use his eyes and ears, — eagerly helped to fill any gap by expressing admiration for the rooms, the appointments, the decorations, the flowers, each individual silver bauble on the guéridon, the screen, the tea-caddy, even the cups and saucers.

"Yes," Norreys magnanimously announced, "I was telling Ruff that he has the knack of succeeding in all he undertakes."

All added unstinted praise. The host smiled, but it was not the smile of a happy man. Without any cut-and-dried arrangement he had laid out a sort of programme for the entertainment of his guests. His exquisite etchings were even more rare than beautiful. He had some very clever sketches by great masters. He especially piqued himself on his books, being the owner of unique copies with bindings which touch the soul of the connoisseur. He could besides draw aside a silken curtain from a shelf of shabby volumes whose title-pages and fly-leaves were scrawled over with signatures which made the blood of collectors burn with emulation. Nothing in his rooms was every-day or commonplace. The hall-marks on his silver rendered each piece a positively priceless possession, and his samovar had its only duplicate in the winter palace of a Russian grand duke. These appurtenances, trivial it is true, yet still suggesting

the acme of civilization, were to have given him the requisite cue, and he was to have talked to the ladies in his very best vein, as only a clever man can talk who is at home in his subject. He had, however, counted without his guests. It might not be easy to tell what occasion Whiley Norreys did not consider his own; now, at least, he believed thoroughly that Providence, watching over Holly Ruff, — who, like some other gifted people, wrote like an angel and talked (in the presence of ladies at least) like Poor Poll, — had conducted him, Whiley Norreys, hither. He assumed all the prerogatives of a host; he established everybody to his liking; he instructed Miss Hurst how to heat the samovar and to make the tea, the knowledge of which occult process he evidently considered his own by special revelation. In fact, Holly Ruff and Breck stood apart like interlopers; Ruff tremulous with suppressed irritation, while Breck was glad to be a looker-on. He had blushed and dropped his eyes on meeting Mrs. Childe, and had not ventured to encounter her glance. He hated to remember that he had given way to a romantic, impractical impulse. Then, besides, if he had been recognized he might have seemed intrusive, absurd, maudlin. The days of troubadours were past, and certainly he had in general no desire to play the rôle. Thus he and Ruff stood looking at and listening to the group, each member of which seemed to have a thousand things to say exactly apropos and not once lacking in precision of ex-

pression. Breck was eagerly interested and was ready to admire what everybody uttered and did. Ruff was not so happy; he was more conscious of himself; it galled him to reflect that he was showing himself ineffective, and that, too, before the woman he wished to impress with the fact of his superior effectiveness. He had yearned to lift the burden of inanity with which she was weighted, to fuse her dull, inert, wealthy existence with the fire and sparkle of his own wit and intellect.

"Mr. Ruff seems to me to lead the most enviable existence," Miss Hurst remarked. "Do you often give afternoon teas, Mr. Ruff?"

"Do you suppose he has time, to say nothing of inclination?" interposed Milly. "He has his life, that is to say, his career, to deal with, to divide it between work, recreation, sleep, duty, pleasure, and the rest of it."

Ruff bowed, and tried to look like a man who suppresses more of feeling than he shows or utters.

"The scheme of things is all in favor of men," pursued Milly.

"A man has something to do," said Miss Hurst.

"A woman used to think she had," remarked Mrs. Fletcher.

"Yes, to make every man her slave and every woman her friend," said Mr. Childe gallantly.

"What an existence!" observed Milly. "One would have more joy over one downright remorseless enemy than over the ninety and nine who fawned upon one."

"As if Mrs. Lee Childe could have an enemy," said Whiley Norreys. "Mr. Childe has defined her, — every man her slave, every woman her friend."

"It is quite superfluous to tell her such things," said Miss Hurst. "She has everything her own way. I used to have lovers and friends; nowadays I am their confidant and they talk by the hour about Mrs. Lee Childe. Some people consider that her manner is rather distant at times, but with that sort of a finished woman one can't always tell from a woman's manner just what she means, you know. They realize that, and also that a woman has sometimes to be a coquette in self-defense. They forgive her everything."

"You are absurd, Georgy," said Milly, laughing. "I hate it."

"To have every man at your feet? I assure you it is a great deal worse to have no man at your feet. I hope you are taking notes, Mr. Ruff," she continued, addressing her host, "and that we shall see all our good things in the morning papers."

"I have not the honor of being a reporter," he retorted. "I ought to have remembered that people are used to having their doings chronicled, and have posted a stenographer behind the screen."

"Mr. Ruff's art is more subtle," observed Milly. "He listens and observes, then shows up our follies in an epigram. However, society never knows when it is laughed at."

"Why should one wish to laugh at society?" asked Mrs. Ferris.

"Unless society could be laughed at," returned Milly, "I really do not see what it was intended for."

"Now, Mrs. Childe," said Norreys, "don't you think that in a spirit of wit or of paradox you occasionally take a tone about society which is a trifle unfair?"

"Unfair? If one does not go into society to get a little amusement out of the absurdities of the chief actors, what should one go for?" Milly retorted. "It is true that this ideal entertainment sometimes fails. Often when I am assisting at the most expensive affairs, the thought comes over me that there is actually no flame to justify the candle. However, one has to go on smiling and responding with fervor to everybody's conversation. It does seem a pity that from the very nature of things there can be no ideas in society. As soon as anybody has ideas, like Mr. Ruff, for example, he has something valuable to do with them, and so gives up society."

"Of course, of course," said Norreys smoothly. "Ruff is a clever man, possessing versatile knowledge, wit, — all that. But yet literary people have always shown a secret hankering after the society of fashionable people."

"The thing is, Norreys," Ruff managed to find opportunity to say, "we have ideas, — ideas, alas, some of them! which it needs a hatful of money to carry out. Now you have the hatful of money, so we run after you, hoping that you will carry out our ideas."

"I don't say that I am a great original thinker," said Norreys with his large bland gesture, "nor do I claim that many people in our set are great original thinkers, but I will assert this, that every scribbler in New York has his eye on us and makes a paragraph upon our least movement."

"And did you ever see such impudence as they put in the papers?" said Mr. Childe. "This very morning I found this in the 'Republic.'" He fumbled in his pocket for a scrap of paper, drew it out, and with a lively air of indignation read from it: "'The young and lovely Mrs. Childe, heiress of the Pardee millions and widow of Lee Childe, formerly one of the best-known men about town, has emerged from her two years of mourning, and promises to be a bright particular star in the social firmament this winter.'"

"I did not expect to hide my light under a bushel," said Milly. "I myself never read those paragraphs, but if that is the worst they find to tell of me I can endure it."

"But to say you are only a two years' widow when everybody knows poor Lee died about five years ago," said Mrs. Fletcher, — "it is cruelly unjust."

"I am grateful for their moderation. They might have said two months."

"Here is another," said Mr. Childe testily. "I cut them out and paste them in a book. I consider them one of the signs of the times, danger signals that show what this generation is coming

to." Again he raised his eyeglasses, and read in his soft, drawling voice, "'Mrs. Lee Childe, who, although the richest woman in New York, is only twenty-five years old, is a fearless rider. Not unfrequently the early morning bird in Central Park'"—

"As if I were a worm," murmured Milly.

"'Sings pæans at the sight of the fair equestrian, faultlessly arrayed in a gray habit. She sits her black horse squarely and well, shoulders well back in the English fashion. Occasionally she is accompanied by her venerable father-in-law, Rutherford Childe, who is one of the last surviving relics of a generation whose manners had the old-fashioned court stamp of another century when social distinction was not founded on the possession of vulgar dollars.'" Mr. Childe dropped his glasses and gazed first at one, then at another of the group. "How old do you suppose they think I am?" he asked plaintively. "By that allusion to the last century, do you suppose they mean to give the idea I was born in seventeen hundred something?"

"They make the most nonsensical mistakes," said Norreys soothingly. "If I were to tell you all the absurdities they have concocted about me you would wonder how I contrive to survive it. But let us remember that the eyes of the world are upon us. *Noblesse oblige.* The important thing is to give them something worth telling. I am ready to confess, Ruff, that it needed just this lynx-eyed criticism, this free observation, this bold,

intrusive daylight let into every crack and cranny of our daily lives, to make New York see its faults. New York has developed. I am no chicken, and I knew New York when it was comparatively crude, and I can assure you all that New York has improved and is improving all the time. And I am willing to attribute it in part to the fact that, no matter what paper we take up nowadays, we see ourselves, as it were, in a mirror."

"D—d impudence! that is what I call it," said Mr. Childe. "And as to New York having improved, I would rather have one side of Washington Square as it was when I was a boy than to have all Murray Hill put together."

"The glamour of youth, the light of other days," said Whiley Norreys. "Now I am a disinterested judge. I see things with an unprejudiced eye, and when I look back I must concede the fact that formerly there was nothing rounded, finished, symmetrical, about New York society. Of course a few old families and a few rich families lived in a handsome way. But twenty-five years ago it was impossible for a fastidious man to accept invitations freely without encountering some painful shocks. No standard existed, one might say. I shall never forget one experience after my return from Europe, where I had lived for two years on terms of intimacy with people who really understood the art of *savoir faire* and *savoir vivre*. Alas, it seemed for a while as if that season had been my Capua, and had quite unfitted me for the rigors of Ameri-

can existence. Naturally my return was the signal for hospitalities among the Norreys and Whiley connection, — a respectable connection, I think I may venture to say. But I suffered, — I assure you I suffered. I shall never forget dining with my aunt, Mrs. Vandervoort, on Washington Square, a contemporary of your own, my dear Mr. Childe."

"Ten years older, at least, — at least, ten years older," said Mr. Childe.

"Just so, of course, but excellent people of the solid sort; no end of money which had been theirs for generations; the same English butler they had set out with forty years before; a capital cellar with the choicest Madeira I ever tasted. The dinner was given on what Americans call Thanksgiving Day. We had oysters, soup, fish, and then roast turkey, a magnificent bird brought to the table and set before my uncle, who was an expert carver. I greeted the ever familiar sight after my European experience, for roast turkey is, I may say, a distinctively American dish — like canvas-back and terrapin. I had not eaten what I called roast turkey during my absence. To advance: my uncle sent me generous slices of the white meat, also a second joint, and I looked round for the giblet gravy. The butler was dispensing the champagne, and one of his assistants brought me mashed potato, while another offered cauliflower. Now, as it happens, cauliflower is my favorite vegetable. It is indeed more than a vegetable, it is a dish. Thus, there was something almost painful in having

it offered as a mere auxiliary to turkey and mashed potato, with neither of which has it either that natural conjunction or that piquant opposition which results in the happy harmony, or the marriage of contraries, which is the soul of good eating. Still, as I before remarked, I like cauliflower; so, against my better judgment, I yielded and helped myself to some. No sooner had I bestowed half the room left on my plate on the cauliflower, hoping for the speedy advent of the melted butter to eat it with, than peas appeared at my elbow. I have a weakness for French peas, and as there was still an inch of bare space I appropriated it for those delicate *petits pois fins*. The butler by this time had made his rounds with the champagne, and now shoved cranberry before me with one hand, while with the other he offered giblet gravy, not as an alternative, but as an adjunct, for one eats both cranberry sauce and giblet gravy with turkey. But how was one to achieve it? Where was I to find room for either? However, glancing at my fellow-guests, I discovered that each man or woman's plate was heaped to the height of six inches, and saying to myself, 'What others dare I will venture,' I proceeded to pile cranberry sauce on top of my turkey, which was indeed the only possible haven for it, then I deluged my mashed potato with gravy. At the same instant the gods, taking their own time as usual, answered my prayer for melted butter, and I accordingly ladled out the melted butter and inundated my cauliflower. Imagine, Mrs.

Childe, the *olla-podrida* on a plate at the utmost ten inches in diameter. Within this thirty inches of margin were turkey, potato, cranberry, cauliflower, peas, gravy, and melted butter! Everything seemed to have changed places; turkey was submerged in a *purée* made of peas and melted butter; the potato was flavored with cranberry, the cauliflower with giblet, while the peas were mixed up with the oysters used in the turkey stuffing. Everything, in short, tasted of what it should not."

"Just fancy," said Mrs. Ferris.

"What did you do?" inquired Milly.

"What a man of the world does under all circumstances when he can, — I ate my dinner. I took what came uppermost."

"What splendid self-denial! What high courage!" said Milly. "Did it disagree with you?"

"The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church," said Norreys. "Having eaten that dinner I recognized my mission. It was to preach a crusade, to teach my countrymen how to dine. 'Here,' I said, 'is a good dinner spoiled in the serving. These unnatural combinations, these soul-curdling amalgamations, shock every finer instinct. Give every dish its chance. How is a man to find his intellect, his wit, his sentiment, while probing his mess for turkey and bringing up something which tastes like anything except its individual self?'"

"Exactly," said Mrs. Childe, springing up. "In

fact, I wish never to dine again. I feel like a stuffed goose after your moving description. Oh, Mr. Breck, I have been thinking to myself there must be a view from that window; will you show it to me?"

As she spoke she moved forward, and Breck joined her. Any disappointment experienced by Mr. Norreys at this desertion was successfully covered by his knowledge of what to do under all circumstances, and he went on illustrating his hypothesis, that the most fastidious of men might nowadays accept invitations freely in New York with an utter absence of shock.

Meanwhile, Milly Childe and Breck stood gazing wistfully seaward in silence. Then turning to him she said softly, —

"It was you. At the time it did not occur to me. It was simply a beautiful voice out of the night. I had come in from the opera, and the moonlight had made me restless, — it often does. I told Wilkins I wanted to sit at the window for half an hour and look out. The trees in the square moved to and fro. Do you remember Hazlitt's 'Wave on, wave on, ye woods of Tuderley, and lift your high tops in the air'? It had the same charm for me. It seemed to me there must be a murmur. I pushed up the sash. Two minutes later" — She paused and looked at him. His face expressed comic entreaty. "I will not talk about it if you object," she added.

"It gave me a fit of self-disgust," said Breck.

"I generally try to preserve my balance. Please forget it. How do you like the view?"

Her eyes rested on his face for a moment more, and she smiled; then she turned and looked at the curving lines of sea and shore. "If I were to settle down in New York," she remarked, "I should like to buy land close to the Battery, tear down what I did not like in my surroundings, and then build me a house."

"Let me draw the plans for you," suggested Breck.

"Are you an architect?"

"Yes," he returned mischievously. "This building was my design. I heard you say as you came up in the lift, that it was the ugliest edifice you had ever seen."

"Really an architect by profession?" said Milly incredulously.

"May I ask why I should not be an architect?"

"You look so young."

"I am twenty-eight."

She flushed slightly with a purely feminine consciousness that she had treated him with a sort of easy familiarity.

"You do not look so old," she said. "I myself am twenty-seven. A very agreeable age, twenty-seven and twenty-eight, don't you think so?"

"A perfect age for a woman. A man of twenty-seven or twenty-eight is devoured by a fever to be doing something, — a need to get what he wants out of the world. In twenty years I expect to be

happier than I ever am now, because by that time I shall either have accomplished something, or have been hopelessly beaten."

She gazed at him with a smile which warmed and tranquilized. She was half amused that he should be talking of accomplishment when he looked to her no more than twenty, — a mere boy, so fresh, so bright, so modest, that she was inclined to tell him that she liked him. She wanted to say that with such a delightful tenor voice he ought to be a singer, but her intuitions were subtle, and she said no more about the song she had heard.

"You have what they call a *tête d'artiste*," she observed. "I think an architect ought to be called an artist. I am often ready to say that the only two great arts are architecture and music."

"I understand you," he said. "But I took up architecture at sixteen, then at the age of seventeen decided that it was not enough, that I must be a painter. For five years I gave my whole heart and soul to that art."

"And then?" said Milly eagerly, with a dozen questions in her eyes and almost on her lips. Mr. Norreys came up at the moment with a cup of tea in his hand, and began a disquisition on tea in general and this in particular. The party all followed him, considering the respective merits of lemon, sugar, and cream as the accompaniment of tea. Everybody broke in by asking what point it was whose shores rose in a purple line against the flame of the sunset; then Mrs. Ferris remembered

that she had an engagement and must be at home in time to dress for it, and the whole party hurried away.

When Ruff had made his last bow from the curbstone, after overseeing Norreys put Mrs. Childe in the carriage, he turned to Sidney Breck, and said, "Come back to my room," with an energy of tone and a fierceness of expression which showed that forces were at work within him requiring instant outlet.

The party had not gone off in a way to please the giver of it, and to lay its failure to Whiley Norreys lightened somewhat the burden which oppressed Ruff's soul. He summed up his opinion of Norreys with succinctness. He trampled on him, ground him to atoms. Then, as it were, picking up the fragments that were left, he reconstructed that unfortunate individual, analyzing his component parts, testing each ingredient with a biting irony. Next, advancing into the wider field of metaphor, he illustrated his idea by making Whiley Norreys appear the exponent, the interpreter of fashionable society against which he declaimed with impassioned rapidity of invective; an insignificant fraction of the world with more dogmatism than the Puritans who resolved, "First, that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the saints; secondly, that we are its saints," — a clique which arrogates superiority to itself, and on what grounds? Simply because with affectation, ignorance, and indolence it washes its hands of what

freshens and invigorates, and by denying a fact supposes that it altogether puts it out of existence. What that class of people call cleverness, Ruff went on to say, a man of brains and sense calls absurdity, and refrains from; they wear blinkers, and thus seeing only that small lighted circle they are traversing, they consider that outside is darkness and gnashing of teeth; and so they keep on their paltry course, piquing themselves on the virtue of never wetting or dusting the soles of their high-heeled shoes, and altogether maintaining a meagre and idea-less existence based upon a rooted disregard for the rights and feelings of human nature at large.

"Oh, come, come, Ruff, let them live," said Breck finally. "After all, they are our fellow-creatures."

"Did you hear him talk about every scribbler in New York?" pursued Ruff hotly. "Do you suppose he meant me?"

"Certainly, you are but one of them."

"And I had flattered the bloated beast by alluding to him as having a hatful of money! He has no money but a beggarly annuity, windbag that he is."

"Of course," said Breck soothingly, "anybody wishes Mr. Norreys were drowned in his own gravy, but all the same he entertained me. So much dexterity in turning a situation to account, such supple rapidity of mind in making something out of nothing, and such flexible vivacity of tongue,

must be so useful. Just consider, if everybody had been struck dumb as you and I were."

"I had plenty to say," retorted Ruff in a tone expressive of injury. "I am not so much at a loss as you seem to think. Only I have a reputation to maintain, and cannot bring myself to the point of talking down to that level. How Mrs. Lee Childe can permit herself so to be stifled by commonplaces, — how — By the way, Sid," — he turned sharply to the youngster, — "what was she saying to you, over by the window?"

"Oh," said Breck, "let me see, what was it?" He was a candid fellow, yet had his reserves, and did not long to have the lens of Ruff's magnifying glasses turned upon certain little out-of-the-way corners of his consciousness. "She was saying she should like to build a house near the Battery. I told her I should like to design it for her," he added.

"A mere caprice, I dare say, like other caprices," said Ruff. "Don't flatter yourself that she is likely to think twice of such a project. It is a pity, an intolerable pity, that a woman of such charm, such actual strength of mind, should fritter herself away upon — Heavens and earth!" he exclaimed, with all the solemnity he could infuse into the invocation.

However, an idea had seized him, and he was already at his desk, economically jotting down the results of his keen emotions. There is a high insight born of disappointment and despair, — it is

worth while to gather the bloom even of our rage. It had happened before that what Ruff had felt and said at a high heat had been, a little later, presented to the reading public with a vivacity of epigram and pointed phrase which left nothing to be desired. For

> "Tasks in hours of insight will'd
> Can be through hours of gloom fulfill'd."

IV.

"WHY not?" Milly Childe had said to herself that day half a dozen times. "Why not? I am twenty-seven years old, a married woman of nine years' standing, and a widow of four and a half; I ought to know what I might and might not do with propriety. Why not?"

She could not help thinking of Sidney Breck. The little adventure of the song which she had heard by the merest chance — for he had directed it towards Mr. Rutherford Childe's windows — charmed her. Perhaps, when next day she suddenly recognized the singer in Breck, she might, if he had been surer of himself, have experienced disillusion. She had learned to distrust votaries of opportunity, and was only too ready to protect herself from possible intrusion. But this young fellow's shamefacedness in meeting her, the leap of color to his face and of light to the eyes he withdrew from hers, before he met her glance, won her friendliness. "What a charming boy!" she said to herself.

However, it turned out that he was twenty-eight years old, her senior, an architect and apparently a successful man. He had begun by being a painter, and he sang delightfully. Certainly, he seemed to have been well endowed by nature, and

there was a simplicity, a directness in him, a way of doing what he set about without any effort, that easily persuaded her he might do anything he attempted. He interested her, — that she was ready to confess; and so few people actually interested her that she found her curiosity to know more of Breck a satisfactory explanation to this new mood of fervor, almost recklessness, this willingness to take the initiative. She had hoped he would come to see her of his own accord, but he had not come. She thought of sending him an invitation to dinner, and looked in the directory for his address. By an odd coincidence his place of business had the same street and number as that of her lawyer, Mr. Joshua Venn. It was after making this discovery that she said to herself, "Why not?"

It had never been Mrs. Childe's habit to go to see Mr. Venn. When she required his services she sent him a note or a dispatch by wire, and he at once dropped all other business and set out to call upon her. But ten days after Holly Ruff's "tea," just as Mr. Joshua Venn was bowing out a visitor, he was startled by the apparition of his favorite client, standing apparently lost in thought or bewildered by her strange surroundings on top of the landing, reading the names on the doors which opened into the main corridor.

"My dear Mrs. Childe," said Mr. Venn, advancing towards her, "can I flatter myself you are coming to see me?"

As it chanced, she was studying the sign of

"Champion and Breck, architects," but she at once transferred her full attention to the solicitor, held out her hand, and said, —

"Of course I was coming to see you. There are twenty things I wish to consult you about. Are you at liberty?"

Not to have been at liberty to devote his best powers to Mrs. Lee Childe would have been to defeat his dearest ambitions. He was a neat, carefully dressed man, always wearing gray tweeds which heightened the pallid effect of his colorless face and closely trimmed white beard and hair. If he could ever have been said to glow it was at this moment, as he led the way to his private room, placed his visitor in a chair with the light on her face, and waited with every faculty alert to find out what this sudden urgent business might be. Although he was the least imaginative of men, his mind with far-reaching speculation had instantly fastened on the idea that she was thinking of a second marriage.

Milly, being a woman, also had her intuitions, and foreseeing that a lynx-eyed lawyer would trace the least of her actions back to some adequate course, she had come laden with a memorandum book full of accounts which she declared puzzled her. She wished him also to look into the practical workings of a charity which she had endowed three years before, to which she was now urged to make further contributions. She described to him the importunities of worthy people who be-

sieged her, waylaid her, and extorted money almost by force. Letters, notes, and messages she knew how to manage. She had, she told Mr. Venn, engaged a secretary with whom she spent two hours every other morning, dictating answers which were taken down in shorthand and then amplified and printed by a type-writer.

"Heaven knows," she said, "I am well enough aware that I deserve little, and that many of my fellow-mortals deserve much. I should like to feel that I had helped some human being to a better chance for living well. But these begging letters! They confide the most intimate histories, and explain how the timely present of fifty or a hundred, even five dollars can raise an impoverished existence to felicity. One person wants it to pay a troublesome debt; another actually needs a new gown; while ever so many long for a trip to Europe."

"Refuse them all, my dear madam — refuse them all," said Mr. Venn. "They are all impostors, every one."

"But then it is so hard not to be an impostor," said Milly. "Don't you ever feel like an impostor yourself, Mr. Venn?"

"Good God, no, my dear Mrs. Childe. What could put such an idea into your head?"

"It very often comes into my head that I am an impostor," said Milly. "I have so little chance to be actual and real, — to do what I wish and to say what I think and feel." She paused and laughed. "I see I surprise you, Mr. Venn."

"You are the most fortunate woman on the face of the earth," said Mr. Venn with conviction. "You can do, be, say, and feel whatever you incline to. If your life is not a verity it must be your own fault."

"That is what I say to myself," said Milly, "that I must be a poor creature if I cannot find some real pleasures, and appoint myself some real duties, in the world. You see I am not a strong-minded woman. As a child my mother governed me absolutely. Then I married when a mere unformed girl, and I was so anxious to please my husband and his family that I bent myself double to conform to every request made of me. It has all shaped me. I may have individual impulses, but I am timid. I still feel as if I had no right to decide for myself, as if somebody must criticise or laugh at me — You see I make you my father confessor" —

She put out her hand to the lawyer, who took it awkwardly, looking at her with a wooden countenance, keeping his gaze fixed on her with an air of expectation as if certain that some particular confidence was to follow this introduction.

"Well?" he said finally.

"Well, what?" she returned, laughing and drawing back her hand.

"Now tell me what you actually want of me," said he. "This is mere preamble."

"Oh, you are so deep," said Milly, still laughing.

"But there is something else."

"Nothing in the world except that it had occurred to me that I might build something, and thus fasten on some interest in life."

"Build something!"

"Well, renovate, make over, what you will. I think I should like to have a new country house, after some pretty modern fashion" —

"Oh!"

"People live so artistically nowadays," said Milly, "I don't see why I should not have a cottage all gables and bay windows and chimneys and oriels. It occurred to me it might be amusing to consult an architect about making over one of my houses according to the new ideas."

"I suppose you own a hundred houses."

"I mean one of those I live in. For example, something might be done to the house in the Berkshire Hills, or would it be better to build a new one?"

"Oh, Mrs. Childe, the idea!"

"Am I not sufficiently well off?"

He shrugged his shoulders and screwed up his lips.

"I suppose the money might be found."

"But why are you adverse to the idea?"

"I am not adverse, except that on general principles when you have not a good reason for doing a certain thing you have a good reason for not doing it."

"Why not put it the other way, that when one

has not a good reason for not doing a thing, one has a good reason for doing it?"

"Ah, you belong to a sex which delights in paradox, Mrs. Childe. I belong to a sex which prefers explicit facts."

"Then I may as well announce to you as an explicit fact that I am going to have my Berkshire house changed into a Queen Anne."

He looked at her quizzically, rubbed his forehead, then tapped it reflectively with his forefinger.

"She has got an idea in her head," he muttered.

"Of course I have got an idea in my head," said Milly. "Other women live in a perfect whirlwind of devices and caprices. Every day is full of events. The smallest incident of their existence is expanded into its fullest measure. I am so dull in comparison. I read too much, I brood too much. I think of a thing I want to do until I see through it and beyond it and realize its nothingness. I want to begin and do things without thought, — to say 'Unto the day, the day'" —

"Hum, hum!" said Mr. Venn, raising his forefinger and shaking it. "Had you thought, my dear Mrs. Childe, of any particular architect to whom you would commit your house?"

She burst into a fit of laughter.

"You see through me," she said. "I throw myself on your mercy."

"Is it Mr. Champion or is it Mr. Breck?" he inquired, smiling grimly, his head a little on one side.

"What sort of a man is Mr. Champion?"

"Oh, middle-aged, — fifty at least, faithful but not brilliant. His partner is said to have all the originality in the firm."

"What sort of a man is Mr. Breck?"

"I know nothing against the young man, — nothing."

"Anything to his good?"

"Hitherto he has not existed to me except as a good-looking boy whom I meet occasionally on the stairs."

"Mr. Venn!"

"Mrs. Childe."

The two looked at each other then. He had never quite taken the measure of his client, whom he considered inscrutable, but now her trust in him was so naive his sympathy was stirred. She wore the gray dress she had on at Holly Ruff's rooms, but to-day a small bonnet had replaced the broad-brimmed hat. She was certainly the prettiest woman he had ever seen. Although he had a wife and four daughters he felt half jealous of the boyish-looking architect.

"Could there be any harm in my calling on Mr. Breck and requesting him to make me some plans?" she now inquired.

"Harm? Not the least in the world. I take it you are acquainted with the young man."

"I have met him," said Milly; "in fact, he interests me, and I should like to help him. I wanted to be sure there was no harm in it."

"Harm? Very charitable, most laudable; not but that Champion & Breck have plenty of business."

"Would you, perhaps, go with me to see him, Mr. Venn?"

Mr. Venn would have liked nothing better, but he was the soul of discretion, and he believed his client would prefer to go alone.

"If you required my services," he said, "I should be most happy to accompany you; as it is, you do not need me. It is simply the most natural thing in the world for you, on your way out, to knock at Mr. Breck's door, and stop for a moment to consult him."

"You see nothing out of the way in my going?"

"Nothing out of the way whatever."

She rose at once, drawing the fluffy boa closer to her throat, looking so youthful and so pretty he had a feeling that he was, perhaps, permitting an indiscretion. It might after all do harm,—it might put ideas into the young fellow's head. He wished he had not committed himself to this course. He meant never to decide anything without due reflection, and, alas, now that he had reassured her as to the propriety of her mission she seemed in frantic haste. She shook hands with him, laughed, and murmured something about his goodness to her. He stiffened with a sort of displeasure as he let her out, escorted her for three steps, then with a cool "I bid you good-

day, Mrs. Childe," turned on his heel, went back, and closed the door. He stood in the centre of the room, reflecting that a lawyer's responsibilities are heavy; that just as his observation and insight are finer than those of other men, so he ought more carefully never to —

A knock sounded on the panel.

"Come in," he said gruffly, expecting a clerk, and thinking of the fair apparition probably at this moment dawning upon Breck in his atelier.

The door opened, and there stood Mrs. Childe, her eyes brighter than ever and her cheeks more rosy.

"He was not in?" ejaculated Mr. Venn.

"I don't know," she said under her breath. She entered and shut the door. "My courage failed me," she explained. "I kept saying to myself that I was twenty-seven years old, a married woman, and that Mr. Venn had assured me it was absolutely proper; but, nevertheless, just as I lifted my hand to knock, I turned and precipitately fled."

"Shall I accompany you?" inquired Mr. Venn.

"Perhaps you will kindly ask Mr. Breck to call upon me at my own house," said Milly.

Mr. Venn escorted his client to her carriage.

"It is deeper than I supposed," he said to himself as she drove away; "I must inquire into that young man's antecedents. I wonder who knows him."

Milly, on her way up-town, had ample time to

think over her senseless panic. Holly Ruff had told Sidney Breck there were a dozen women in her. She clearly recognized in herself two identities, — one, Emily Briggs, and the other, Milly Childe. The first, the actual woman, — timid, shrinking, passionate and enthusiastic; the other, the woman she aimed to be, — forever on guard, with a humorous, satiric, almost disdainful conviction of the littleness of the world and the fundamental nothingness of social ambitions and social forms. She declared to herself that she had no compunctions; she had been brow-beaten, laughed at, ignored, and made uncomfortable by shrewish, rude, and pushing women when she first entered the world as Mrs. Lee Childe; she had felt herself to be ignominiously beaten, and when, finally, she gained the requisite inspiration and energy, she had decided to have her turn. "With a great sum obtained I this freedom," she sometimes said to herself, quoting St. Paul with a difference, remembering her early disappointments, renunciations, despairs. One day she had clung to her husband with passionate entreaties that she might no longer be dragged into the society she shrank from, believing in her own hopeless insignificance. Lee Childe had stroked her hair, with a half-pitying laugh. "Why, Milly," said he, "you have as much intellect, as much good looks, and certainly you have more money than the most impudent of the women who you say frighten you out of your senses. Beat them at their own game."

The germ of the change in her had dated from that hour. The young and ardent mind gathered its forces. She was eager to improve, and she developed, finding infinite invitation beckon her from the charming world from which she had hitherto felt herself shut out. She accepted certain axioms of her husband's as definitions of her own shortcomings. She must learn never to show agitation; never to permit anything to excite or over-hurry her. She must distinguish herself from others; must create a distinctive style and adhere to it, yet must never seem to stand alone or apart; must rule a coterie, yet never seem to insist on being the first; must be complying, yet actually must concede nothing; must study everything, penetrate everywhere, keep herself in touch with all that moves, yet must not be too anxious to communicate her ideas of things to others, — must be more eager to accept with swift and unerring intuition what others communicate. Since there is no such unerring test of culture and character as what is found amusing or ridiculous, it is best generally to be serious.

"No man would talk much in society if he remembered how infernally it bored him to listen to other men," was another aphorism of Lee Childe's.

But when Milly had in a measure attained the knowledge she sought she was amazed to find it a barren vantage-ground. As soon as she could hold her own against the encroachments of her supposed enemies, she laughed to see how little

formidable they actually were. She had been studying nights and days to be the equal of those brilliant, world-wide, subtle men and women, — who, she now perceived, lived chiefly by catchwords and hearsays, always in hopes that all new ideas outside of routine would "blow over" so that they need not be troubled with painful conundrums. If Milly was driven into an attitude of skepticism and disdain of society, it was by the necessity of expressing her faith in something better than she had so far found. The closer the horizons came which had once seemed so remote, the more she grew in what is called knowledge of the world, the better she recognized restrictions and limitations which she longed to leap over into nature and freedom. But how was she to escape from the circle in which she constantly retraced her own steps?

She was in this mood, disenchanted, dissatisfied, wrestling with herself and her environment to find out the word of her enigma, when she met Sidney Breck. The incident of the serenade had touched sensibilities long dormant. His few words on the following day had deepened the impression. What she longed for was to meet him without constraint; to hear him talk, to find the clue to his personality. Little as he had so far said, she realized that he was ready to give her the real outcome of his thoughts. He seemed to her fresh, bright, and unspoiled. Her husband's characteristic tendency had been never to give her his real thoughts.

Taciturn, irritable, skeptical, incredulous, he had met all experiences with a shrug, his impressions of the outside world warped and colored by his self-limited observation.

What wonder was it that in her rebound from the long cramp of hopeless pessimism Milly should have wished to know some one like Breck, who was the soul of candor and found every experience in life full of interest? She was, however, far from acknowledging the significance of her interest in him, and argued, with all the casuistries of which a clever woman's heart and head are capable, that she was merely acting out the rôle she had imposed upon herself, and seizing upon anything which seemed pleasant and to her own advantage. Selfish as this sounded, her impulse, she declared, was to do something for the young man's financial advantage. She would give him her country house to tear to pieces and build anew as he chose. She congratulated herself that nobody except Mr. Joshua Venn suspected her girlish fluctuations of feeling, her going forward and back, and blushing over the simple matter of calling in an architect. Mr. Venn did not count, as he knew all her indiscretions, and might sum up this along with the mistakes in her accounts and her bad management in her charities.

She had not, however, been unobserved either time she stood before the door of Champion & Breck. Such apparitions in a shimmer of silver gray did not often wander irresolutely up and

down the corridors of that centre of driving business. Thus Sidney Breck had heard that the rich widow had twice stood at his door, apparently ready to knock and ask for admittance, before Mr. Venn dropped in at the architects' office and dryly informed the junior partner that Mrs. Lee Childe, of Stuyvesant Square, wished to consult him about remodeling her house among the Berkshire hills. The lawyer looked round the place, which was hung with plans, etchings, photographs, and a painting representing the Ducal Palace in Venice. Half-a-dozen men were at work at different desks and tables, of whom Sidney Breck was the busiest.

"Shall I go to-morrow?" he inquired with a startled air.

"No time was specified," said Mr. Venn.

"Please tell me exactly when to go," said Breck, so humbly that the lawyer was impressed by the guilelessness of the lamb destined for the sacrifice.

It was two mornings later that the architect was ushered into the Childe house and found Milly sitting in the library with her father-in-law.

"Oh, thank you for coming," she said, rising, and giving him her hand. "Papa, you remember Mr. Breck? Mr. Venn and I are discussing the propriety of making some improvements in my Berkshire house."

"I know what that means," said Mr. Childe, — "that you will go to —— expense and spoil a fine old-fashioned mansion."

"Exactly; one cannot make one's self over, — one is so dreadfully restricted when one's identity is concerned, but one may tear down and rebuild a house. Besides, one likes to have something distinctive. Now my house in Berkshire is neither mediæval nor early English, nor Elizabethan nor Gothic nor Queen Anne."

"Thank Heaven I shall not have to live in it, nor even to pay the bills," said Mr. Childe; indeed, paying bills had always been one of the social annoyances he had shirked. "If you want to consult me I shall be in the next room," and gathering up the morning papers he left the library.

The young widow and the young architect stood side by side on the hearth-rug; both were smiling, and for a moment neither had anything to say; then Milly began: —

"I have laughed to remember how Mr. Ruff's party was spoiled for him. He is clever, literary, exclusive; why did he invite fashionable people? Did he fume and rage after we were gone?"

"He said some very good things," replied Breck; "indeed, he filled his note-book and has been in a bland humor ever since."

"I should like to see that note-book. Still, it might throw my sympathies on the side of Mr. Norreys."

"Mine are there already. I have a great respect for such an expert in the art of living."

"You are more good-natured than I am," said Milly. "I feel like sending him across Africa or

on an Arctic voyage. I like etiquette very well in its place" —

"I have always wished one might formulate its rules as one does the laws of whist, in order to understand how to lead and how to follow, and above all how to finesse," said Breck.

"When conventionalities are made too much of," pursued Milly, "I belong to the opposition and long to go on all fours. Still, I admit, some rules of politeness are graceful. I have not yet asked you to sit down."

She dropped into a seat by the table and he took a chair opposite.

"I might say," she went on, "that I learned etiquette much as I learned whist. My own mother feared above all things that I might grow to love the things of this world too dearly, and if she gave me a rule of behavior she gave also its antidote by showing me that forms were of no consequence, — that the heart and spirit alone must be kept aright. It was after my marriage that I found out the convenience of a definite knowledge of forms, and as a rule I stick to forms; yet I never have the comfort of feeling that forms will save me."

He was looking at her so intently that she paused, expecting him to speak; after waiting a moment, she proceeded: "Sometimes, it is true, I say to myself, 'I cannot please everybody and myself into the bargain, so I will please myself.'"

"One's self is such a formidable person to please,"

said Breck, "one soon gives it up and accepts almost any tyrant in its place."

"Do not discourage me," said Milly, "for now I want to please myself. I want to make over my house."

"That is a most laudable ambition. I must go and look at the house in Berkshire county."

"An impossible journey at this time of the year, with two feet of snow on the ground. I will sketch the house for you. Have you a pencil?"

There was a litter of cards and notes of invitation on the table, and she took up a large square of pasteboard and began to draw on the blank side, talking all the time, telling him of a winter she had once passed at the place when the roads were blocked with snow and she was for a fortnight almost completely cut off from the outside world. "There it is," she said, giving him the sketch. "It was built for a summer residence, and is all balconies and windows. There is an effect of largeness and light about it which I rather enjoy."

He was struck by the cleverness of the drawing, which was executed with vigorous telling strokes and the precision of a practiced draughtsman. The house as it was pleased him so well that he was reluctant to suggest any alteration which might improve it. While he was studying the sketch she said eagerly: —

"I was interested in what you told me about having set out to be a painter. You evidently loved your art; I have wondered why you gave it up?"

"I was obliged to make an income," said Breck.

"But surely your pictures would soon have given you a living."

"I was young, — I could not wait to conquer my public," said Breck. "It was like this," — he looked her fairly in the face and smiled: "I have a sister older than myself. There are just the two of us. Our father died when I was ten, my mother six years later. When I was seventeen my sister married and soon afterwards I went to Paris. I was twenty-two when her husband died suddenly during a commercial crisis in which he had lost everything, not only his money but hers. She had three children."

"Ah, I see," said Milly with a quick sigh. "You went to work to support her and her children."

"I came home at once. Of course I had to set to work. I had had just enough to keep myself during those five years in Paris, but it was not enough for all of us. I was ready to undertake anything that offered. As it happened, I had already studied a year in a Boston architect's office. I now went to Mr. Champion, who is a distant cousin of ours, and asked him if he had any opening for me. He told me that plans were being offered for the new Phœnix Building, and that here was a chance to show what I could do. So I competed. The judges accepted my design, and Mr. Champion offered me a partnership. So there I have been for six years."

"Tell me about your sister. Does she live in New York?"

"She was married last year to a man in San Francisco."

"You made all that sacrifice for her, yet she married and left you?"

"I was very glad to have her marry. She was only thirty, and her present husband is a fine fellow with large means, and not only adores her but her three children."

"You are not married?" Milly asked suddenly.

"Oh, no, I have never thought of marrying," said Breck, reddening to his ears. "I have a room just round the corner from here. While my sister was with me we had a little house miles uptown. Naturally I was lonely when she went away. I especially missed her two youngest children, who were very fond of me."

"You speak as if all this were nothing particular," said Milly, with an eloquent face, "and yet you resigned a career which might have given you a great success."

"Perhaps it seems to you sordid in me to give up my art for a livelihood," said Breck; "but you cannot think exactly how a man feels when he has a family dependent on him, and he has to turn swiftly towards any horizon seeking for some path which leads not to fortune, but to a bare living. Of course it hurt me, — that is, it would have hurt me if I had stopped to think about it. But I did not stop. I was never in all my life so happy as

when my design was accepted. I was so happy that I could not sleep. For three nights I could not sleep. You see I was so anxious about poor Alice, — her baby was only six months old. A man's personal prepossessions, tastes, cravings, do not count for much in such crises."

She did not answer except that lips, eyes, and the flush on her cheeks had a significance of their own.

"I look at pictures with a thought of my unpainted ones," said Breck. "Sometimes I see one that reminds me of some sketch of my own. But after all, I might never have had any distinction as a painter. Some of my work was a good deal praised, and I obtained several medals; but nobody knows exactly what is in an artist until he has passed a certain point. It is fairly astonishing how many fellows seem at first to have greatness in them. But some mental limitation comes in and hinders development."

He paused again, and their eyes met.

"I am grateful to architecture," he went on. "I have never been disinterested. I made up my mind to put my head to it and work with all my might, and I have done so. No great opportunity has come in my way, but they may come. In fact, we have some fair chances; we have been designing some Newport cottages."

"Whose?"

"The Poorshaws' and Mrs. Geddes'."

"Oh, indeed, I am so glad. That is a good chance, I am sure."

Breck laughed. "Of course what I want to do is to build a Gothic cathedral," he said. "But I am not likely ever to have one of the opportunities which set the spirit free. I have to clip my imagination and accept thankfully Queen Anne cottages, or whatever comes in my way."

"Could you not begin again now to be a painter?"

"No, I shall not go forward and back. Indeed, I have gradually taught myself to believe that it is best as it is. At any rate, I have escaped disenchantment and failure. There is a time when every young fellow considers himself a genius, but bit by bit, with relentless clearness, fate tells the truth. Many men allow themselves to be deceived by the little talent they possess, which often is just enough to obscure the actual facts and make it seem worth while to go on. I rejoice that I am not one of those self-deceivers."

"All this shows some resolution on your part."

"I have got plenty of resolution and plenty of energy. A man can hardly fail to have whose duty is put before him as mine was put before me. Besides, I have a bent towards architecture, and I achieved a certain degree of success at once," said Breck. "It is working with an insufficient talent, out of dilettanteism or in some false direction, which robs a man of his native strength. An insufficient talent is the cruelest of gifts."

He had talked eagerly, as if he longed to make a full confession, but at this moment some realiza-

tion of the fact that he had simply been summoned on professional business by a rich woman who needed his services plucked at his mind with a clear reminder that he was making himself absurd.

"Forgive me," said he, with sudden shyness. "I cannot think what made me forget myself; I never talked like this before."

Milly stretched out her warm white hand, and put it on his. "I forgive you," she said. "Nobody ever talked to me like this before."

Breck looked at the hand, which was withdrawn as swiftly as it came.

"That is because you have known no poor man," he said.

"I am not sure," said Milly, "whether I pity you, or whether I consider you singularly fortunate. It is cruel that a beautiful talent should be crushed without scruple; but, on the other hand" —

"On the other hand," said Breck, laughing, "you respect honest poverty."

"I should like to give you a cathedral to build," said Milly.

"Safer to give me a gable," said Breck. As he spoke he took up the sketch she had made, studied it for a moment, and asked if he might take it away with him. The day after the morrow he was to call again, make some suggestions, and receive hers.

V.

It would have been inconsistent with Holly Ruff's aptitude for timely work if he had always been a laggard in love, and thus he decided soon after his afternoon tea that the time had come for him to strike his blow. The gay season would shortly open, and once in the whirl Mrs. Lee Childe was sure to be so occupied, surrounded, monopolized, she would have no leisure to think consecutively nor to act on her best judgment. Perhaps Ruff's recent experience had taught him that even an insignificant rival may hamper the cleverest man's free play. Indeed, a conventional being of Whiley Norreys's sort, Ruff was now ready to confess, has it in his power to extinguish better men, just as a fog may put out electric lights. Norreys carried weight in society and always held his own, partly because he came from a family who for generations had sat down solidly and maintained their superiority to the rest of the world, and partly because, with an inordinate vanity and activity, he was always ready to secure every advantage that any occasion offered. He was by this time well past forty-five, yet his years had robbed him of nothing, had but given him a complete knowledge of how to get what he wanted out of life. Impossible to forget him or to slight

him, for he was everywhere pliant, assiduous, devoted, always offering attentions to which nobody could be callous. And if, according to his detractors, he had never had an original idea, it must be confessed that he knew very well how to present ready-made phrases which pass current among well-bred people, and he often had the grace to say the timely thing, while cleverer men went too far in search of an illustration and wiser men could not collect their fugitive wits.

Thus ran his rival's meditations, for ever since that occasion when Whiley Norreys carried off the honors, Holly Ruff could not get the man out of his head. Day by day, as Ruff reflected that Mrs. Childe was probably attending dinners, receptions, and the opera, and that Whiley Norreys, faultlessly dressed, was always on hand and always pressing forward with something to say, he suffered. And Whiley Norreys was not the only one who danced attendance upon the young widow: there were Paul Sécor and Archy Laing, to say nothing of Geddes Poorshaw, all three of whom belonged to the Childe or Lee connections, and had the run of the house. Then, looking further afield for dangers, the newspapers were heralding the fact that all feminine New York was in a flutter over the expected arrival of Lord Pompelli and the Hon. Wilfrid Crashaw. They had been bear-hunting in Dakota, but were now on their way east, intending to spend the season in New York.

Thus, it behooved any man, who was in a posi-

tion to speak, to speak and at once. Holly determined to put an end to his uncertainty, for in spite of his logical claims upon Mrs. Lee Childe he did not pretend to absolute certainty.

"Offering one's self to a woman is like tossing one's self up, and not knowing whether one will come down heads or tails," he wrote in his notebook in these days.

Sunday was Mrs. Childe's day; Mrs. Fletcher and Georgy Hurst invariably came in after morning service, spent the afternoon, and partook of the four-o'clock dinner, which was the old-fashioned habit of the house. They were the nucleus of a family party which sometimes drew a long tail after it, and included the whole connection.

One Sunday, just past the middle of December, Holly Ruff entered at three o'clock, and found Mrs. Fletcher sitting before the fire with Mr. Childe, while Georgy Hurst was ensconced on a sofa opposite, engaged in entertaining three or four of the cousins. It was explained to Ruff that Mrs. Lee Childe was in the conservatory, showing some new orchids to Mrs. Crooke Poorshaw. Accordingly, with an air of established habit, he sat down and took up a book. Although he turned the pages, and once or twice made a note, his thoughts were busy on his own personal affairs, and he also had an ear for the scraps of conversation which from either hand floated to his ears.

Mr. Childe was discoursing on his favorite topic, the New York of his infancy, — a very superior city to modern New York.

"I remember," he said, "when an ice-cream man used to go about ringing a bell. He used to come up Broadway and down Bleecker, and then into Washington Square, and very convenient it was."

"Just fancy," said Mrs. Fletcher.

"There was a simplicity, a dignity about life in those days, — a right up-and-down solidity of comfort."

"But, cousin Rutherford," Mrs. Fletcher ventured, "it does seem to me that we are actually more comfortable nowadays. Just take the matter of lights. I remember when we considered it a horrible extravagance to burn more than two candles except on company nights."

"It gave people a chance to talk. There were not so many books to read then, and we could compare ideas, — in fact, become really acquainted with each other."

"Then we were so cold," Mrs. Fletcher continued. "It makes me shiver to think of it. I remember sitting waiting for people to come to a ball with my arms all goose-pimples."

"Nowadays the rooms are so hot I never have an appetite. To go to any place of amusement is to endure the experience of Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego. As to attending church, it is out of the question. I prefer to sleep at home."

"I remember my mother's telling me once when I asked her how she used to dress as a girl," remarked Mrs. Fletcher, "that she could only recall

one circumstance. They lived on Bowling Green, and on Sundays always walked to Old Trinity. She remembered clearly how once on her way home, when she had her future husband in attendance, there was deep snow melting, she constantly wet her feet in little pools of water, and, also, that she had on a white embroidered frock, white silk stockings, and low slippers cross-gartered."

"I remember your mother very well," said Mr. Childe gallantly. "She was always charming, whether she went cross-gartered or otherwise."

"But they had no rubber overshoes in those days; in fact, had only fine-weather clothes. Half the people died of consumption."

"Capital plan, — left room in the world for healthy people. Nowadays everything is given over to invalids."

"I remember mamma's saying once late in life," Mrs. Fletcher now observed, "that in her day people used to stay at home in bad weather, so that one had a chance to write up one's letters, make up one's accounts, and read one's Bible; but that nowadays, what with umbrellas, waterproofs, mackintoshes, and rubbers, one was never left in peace."

"Exactly! There is no peace left for anybody in the world," said Mr. Childe with a sigh.

"They are so clever nowadays," Mrs. Fletcher pursued. "That is the chief fault I find with the new generation, — so many new ideas."

"My dear Agnes, there are no new ideas, and people are not clever," said Mr. Childe. "When

I was a boy they had found out that the earth went round the sun, and in spite of all the talk that goes on I have never been able to see that they had actually discovered anything else."

"But the telegraph, — the telephone" —

"Much better off without them."

"But think of not having foreign news until it is two weeks old" —

"It would be an immense blessing. Think of the stuff they send by cable, — that Mr. William O'Brien is lying abed because he will not put on the regulation prison breeches. I don't care in the least whether he goes *sans culotte* or not."

"I should like to think," said Mrs. Fletcher plaintively, "that some of the new ideas were not worth having. I get so tired of being dragged about to lectures and readings and all the rest of it. One of my granddaughters knows what undifferentiated protoplasm means."

"She may as well comfort herself with that knowledge. She will never get married. A woman who compels a man to gauge his own ignorance goes too deep."

"I remarked to Mary that Madame Récamier knew nothing about such things, and that she knew enough for me."

"You and she knew how to charm every man who came near you, and that is enough for a reasonable woman's ambition."

At this point Miss Hurst's voice took Ruff's ear.

"Of course he wants to marry Milly Childe.

Who does not? She could have the pick of all of you."

"Don't make us out so mercenary," said Geddes Poorshaw.

"Oh, I did not allude to you bloated millionaires. There is such a thing as honest poverty."

"Yes, I have seen it, — know it intimately," said Archy Laing. "If honest poverty could endear me to cousin Milly, I would willingly turn my pockets inside out for her inspection."

Mrs. Fletcher's voice again struck in.

"I never saw two people so absolutely suited to each other, or who were evidently so clearly intended to be man and wife."

"Then why on earth," demanded Georgy Hurst, "do they not get married, aunt Agnes?"

"Because her husband, contrary being that he was, chose to live; only died ten years ago."

"But why did they not marry after his death?"

"Because she was dead herself," Mr. Childe explained impressively. "She must have died ten years before he did."

"They are always talking about dead people," Miss Hurst remarked confidentially to her own group. "I suppose that when I get to be a hundred I shall spend my time in telling what charming people you all were."

"Oh, yes," Mr. Childe was now saying, "my wife was a handsome woman. I should n't have married her else."

"All the Lees were handsome. But she was far more than that."

"Indeed she was," Mr. Childe granted with feeling, "a woman of inexhaustible energy."

"A wonderful woman, I always say that"—

"But impossible to live with," said Mr. Childe with peculiar significance. "I am the most domestic man in the world, but— However, you understood the situation. I will say this about Milly, she is a really agreeable person to have opposite one at table."

At this moment Milly herself emerged from the conservatory with Mrs. Crooke Poorshaw, Mrs. Geddes, and Paul Sécor. It was a veritable gathering of the clan, Holly Ruff said to himself. He sat down by Mrs. Crooke Poorshaw, a rather pretty and very exquisitely dressed woman, with an ambition to attach clever men to her following. She stayed to dinner, and Holly Ruff not only had the pleasure of sitting by her, but he was on Mrs. Childe's left. He was in a position to shine, and he shone. There were sixteen people at table, and they all listened gratefully to his discourse throughout the meal.

"Must I go away?" he asked Mrs. Lee Childe, when, within an hour after they had risen from table, one member of the party after another had dropped out of the circle.

"Do stay," said Milly, "and I will make you a cup of strong tea."

Presently Mrs. Fletcher carried off Mr. Childe to her own Sunday tea-table, and Milly was left alone with her suitor. She had accompanied the

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last guests to the door, and now reëntering the parlors walked the length of the three great rooms towards Ruff, who was standing on the hearth-rug before the fire watching her, his mien as ever critical and alert. How well she moved, he thought to himself; there was a distinct charm about her rapid advance. She was smiling, and he was certain that smile promised him happiness.

"There are happy moments in life. People go away," she said as she drew nearer. "Nothing exhausts me like a family party. While I am talking about all sorts of things for which I care nothing, listening to everybody's solemn confidences, being asked questions I know not how to answer, and would not answer if I could, I say to myself, —

"'If I be I, as I do hope I be,'" —

"'I've got a little dog at home, and he knows me,'"

said Ruff on the instant. "Let me flatter myself, Mrs. Childe, that I am that little dog."

"You are easily flattered," said Milly; "and if I remember aright the little dog in the song turned out a traitor. In fact, only my glass knows me, — the real Emily Briggs."

"I am an old friend, Mrs. Childe," Ruff observed. She had seated herself on a sofa at the right of the fireplace, and he drew a chair close to her side. "I am rather proud of saying," he went on, sinking into it luxuriously, "that I am the oldest friend Mrs. Lee Childe has in New York."

"Thank you," said Milly. "I do seem to have

known you for a long time, and your fidelity has been sometimes tried, perhaps. When I have said 'Come' you have come, and when" —

"You have never yet said to me 'Go,'" put in Ruff entreatingly.

"No, I was about to add that when I have piped to you you have danced, but not as well as you did for Mrs. Crooke Poorshaw. How well you talked all through the long dull dinner! How many good things you said! It seemed almost a pity to give up to a Sunday family dinner what was meant for mankind. But we appreciated you, at least after our fashion. At any rate we are not ungrateful."

"If you listened" —

"Mrs. Crooke Poorshaw listened, which is more to the purpose. She was your inspirer."

"Mrs. Crooke Poorshaw is a pretty and an elegant woman in her way," said Ruff fastidiously. "But when I meet such people I say to myself: 'This is called society; these are acknowledged first people; these are, so to speak, the arbiters of'" —

"Thank you for abusing my nearest connections," murmured Milly. "It saves me no end of trouble. Go on."

"But" —

"I assure you my withers are unwrung. They deserve the most you can say of them. I grant that. Still, they belong to the human race, — you must admit too that they are very much like other people."

There was an almost reprehensible air of raillery about Milly. However, Wilkins, the butler, was standing in the doorway waiting for orders, and Ruff decided that she was only trying to cover an awkward moment. He had not thought of possible eavesdroppers. She ordered tea, and the low table was placed before her; then the table was covered with a cloth, and the service was slowly laid out. Meanwhile, Mrs. Childe turned to Ruff, and said with some eagerness, —

"Tell me, please, about your friend Mr. Breck. Who is he?"

"A bright young fellow. He came from Boston, originally, but is making his way here. He has done some very good work, and his friends expect better work from him. His bent is strongly artistic, he is brim full of originality, and he is besides very thorough."

"But about himself. He has a charming face. He looks clever and he also looks good."

"He has worked too hard to have any time for self-indulgence. He has eked out his income by writing. He does art notices and reviews of art books for the 'Renaissance.' I have given him some work from my own overflow. He is clever, probably has no actual genius, but has a beautifully flexible mind, pliant to every impression and with a gift of expression. He is apt to overwork. We were in the Adirondacks last summer. Never was there such weather. We had to exercise all our ingenuity to avoid being drowned out. That

is, Sidney Breck used all his ingenuity, for he and our guide carried us through. The rest of us were a set of helpless complaining loafers. The most wonderful thing about Sidney is his capacity for work; the next is his sweet temper. He accomplished more than all the rest of us, including the guide, yet never grumbled, never confessed that he was tired, or took the worst experience amiss."

Nobody could outdo Ruff in magnanimity where his friends were concerned. Still one owes something to one's self, and he now proceeded to describe a Norwegian experience in which he himself had displayed shining traits while encountering genuine hardships. Strange to say, Mrs. Childe, whose face had been lighted by a wonderful soft brilliance while the Adirondacks were the theme, now seemed abstracted. That is, her expression, a half-smiling one, remained unchanged, while he was in the midst of a thrilling account of salmon hauling, when he was dragged into deep water and so weighted down by his heavy boots that he was almost drowned before he could be extricated. Certainly, there was nothing in such a predicament to smile over even in retrospect. He had expected a gasp of sympathy, some pallor. However, when a woman is making tea it is impossible to tell whether she is or is not attending to a man. Nettled by her indifference, Ruff said within himself that his next society paper should be on "Works of Supererogation." He would define the foolish labors the modern woman

appoints for herself. He would describe the fashionable afternoon tea-table, with its costly equipment of kettle, lamp, teapot, tea-bell, tea-caddy, sugar-bowl, sugar-tongs, cream-jug, cream-ladle, tea cups and saucers, and bread and butter plates. He would draw a picture of the pretty solicitudes of the tea-maker: first, as to whether the lamp burns to the right degree, then as to whether the water boils or merely simmers; her intense seriousness as she measures out the tea; the coquettish manœuvres with which she goes forward and back, advances and re-advances on the same lines; her tremors of doubt as to the success of her undertaking. Of course a cup of tea, no matter how poor, gains under these vicissitudes a sort of value. But when we consider the brief duration of human life, might it not be as well if the butler in his pantry, or the cook in the kitchen, should set the tea steeping? — thus enabling the queen in the parlor to give time, ear, and eye to the intelligent man who addresses her. In fact, Ruff said to himself, he might add that the modern Penelope who wished to keep her suitors at bay only required to make tea perpetually instead of toiling over tapestry.

His irritation was natural, for it was only too evident that Milly had let her thoughts wander and had lost all clew to the meaning of his discourse. This might or might not be an unfavorable sign, for it was her usual habit to give her undivided attention to any one who spoke to her.

But now she ended the pause which ensued, when he stopped short just at the point where he had waded breast high into the stream in order not to lose his salmon, by asking him if his tea suited him, evidently without a thrill of concern for his safety, and her next remark was absolutely flippant, for she went on to say that Mr. Norreys had views on the subject of making tea.

"I dare say his ideas are correct," said Ruff, with some stiffness. "No man alive surpasses Whiley Norreys in the capacity for laying down the law with intense conviction that two and two make four."

"He sometimes makes me long to declare that two and two make seventeen," said Milly.

"I supposed," observed Ruff, "that everybody in society agreed with Whiley. It is impossible wholly to despise that sort of man, for he adds zest to life by his enjoyment of its trivialities, and his presence enhances the good-nature and comfort so important for the preservation of small coteries."

There was an energy in his accent and a latent disdain in his look as he stirred his cup of tea which made Milly glance towards him with wonder. "Candidly, Mrs. Childe," he went on to say, "I do feel that you are thrown away on a society whose oracle is Whiley Norreys."

Milly, who had just lifted her cup to her lips, put it down untasted.

"Oh, dear, I flattered myself I was doing very

well," she said. "I actually was beginning t pique myself on being quite a fashionable woman.

"Of course; by simply raising your finger yo can be a fashionable woman, — that is, you ca make fashions," said Ruff, holding out his no empty cup to be replenished. "The greater ir cludes the less. But when the world calls you beautiful and successful woman" —

"I never consider myself either a beautiful o a successful woman," said Milly. "I know ver well that if I had no money I should have n followers. Everybody has always laughed at th source of the wealth they are quite willing t accept the advantages of. I used to writhe at an allusion to the Elixir. It was associated wit half-suppressed smiles, whispers, and humorou allusions. Nowadays, I make a point of talkin about my grandfather's famous Elixir, and mor than once I have recommended it to some languid elegant people."

"I feel for all you have suffered," said Ruff, i a touched voice.

"It ought to have been good for my soul," sai Milly, "but it was not good for my soul. A spirit grew in me which made me long to defen myself. Not everybody can be a lioness or a tigress, but the least of creatures can put up he back and spit, and that is what I have done."

"Oh, no," said Ruff.

"Indeed, I have done so; and I have found ou that Tray, Blanche, and Sweetheart, who barked a

me, may now be led by a silken thread. But I suppose I have passed the time of life when one makes real friends. Women flock to see me on my reception days, but if one of them sends up her card on any other day, I say to myself, 'She wants money for some object,' and invariably she does want money."

"I can see," said Ruff, who felt himself softly pushed away from his subject, "that such doubts imperil friendship."

"I envy men their opportunity to make real friends," Milly went on. "It might be almost worth while to be a man to have men's friendships. I suppose the reason you all hang together so is that you know such dreadful things about each other."

"The true friendship is between a man and a woman," Ruff observed, with conviction.

"Let us swear an eternal one," said Milly. "But presently you will marry some woman who does not like me, and where shall I be then? By the by, you and Mr. Breck seem to be good friends."

"I like Breck. I am even fond of the youngster."

"He swears by you."

"I have had it in my power to do a good deal for him," said Ruff. Could it be that it was the mention of Breck which brought that soft brilliance again to her glance and smile?

"He told me he set out to be a painter,"

remarked Milly; "then, needing quick returns, he took up architecture."

"There is no telling what sort of failure he might have made in art," said Ruff. "He has too much cleverness to be a great genius."

All this was miles away from his real subject. Still, with the tea-table spread out, and two men coming in every five minutes to offer some crisp confection, it was of course impossible to broach the question which imperatively rose to his lips. He had no intention of shirking it. He believed she liked him, although to-night she did seem more successfully than usual to dissemble her love. Now, thank Heaven, the tea things were being carried off. There was an air of finality about the way the butler looked round the room as he doubled up the table and put it in its place. A fresh lump of coal was thrown on the fire, and the lights were carefully shaded. While this bustle was going on, Ruff told about a new play which he had been to see the night before. Milly said she would arrange a theatre party for the coming Saturday, and began counting up a dozen people, of whom, alas, Ruff was not one. But then he had just told her he hated theatre parties.

"You bristle with negations. You do not like anything," said Milly. "You see through us; find our wisdom commonplace and our best wit foolish. All our efforts to entertain you are purely disinterested; you will not be entertained."

"You do not understand me at all, Mrs.

Childe," Ruff returned, leaning forward, his pale, ardent face kindled with new light, — even his eyeglasses full of expression. "Everything you do pleases me only too well. The trouble is, I throw you so high above ordinary mortals that I cannot easily resign you to the trivial round, — the buzzing, bustling inactivity which makes up fashionable life."

"What would you have me do?" inquired Milly naively.

His heart was beating rapidly. She certainly offered him a chance to be explicit. He would have liked to say, "Marry me, Mrs. Childe; that is a heaven-appointed career for you." And he was capable of saying it, that is, if he were well warmed up by his subject, instead of approaching it, as it were, in cold blood. What he did contrive to stammer out was: —

"Suppose, Mrs. Childe, I were to be very presumptuous?"

"I suppose I should consider it a bit of human nature. 'Presumptuous mortals,' — it has passed into a phrase."

"But think how long I have known you!"

"An eternity."

"And does not a long, and I may say somewhat intimate, acquaintance give a man a right?"

"It gives a man every right," said Milly.

"You will not strike me dead if I am too bold?"

"Certainly not; striking people dead is no habit of mine. It is too generally the other way."

"Then, Mrs. Childe," said Ruff, "I ask you to be my wife."

"Oh, good gracious, Mr. Ruff, you must be joking."

"Joking!" cried Ruff, in a voice of poignant reproach. "I ask you to be my wife!"

"Please do not ask anything so impossible," said Milly, with a sort of petulance. "Do you suppose I am thinking of a second marriage? Not the least in the world. I began very young. I have had my experience."

"But," said Ruff imploringly, "that is just it. Your experience was perhaps not an absolutely happy one, and I feel as if I" —

"As if you could make it up to me? I assure you I am not thinking of any sort of compensation. Please put the idea out of your head."

"I see," faltered Ruff, overwhelmed by a conviction of his bad management of his own case, "I have taken you by surprise. I ought to have prepared you. Still, Mrs. Childe, I did believe that our whole acquaintance had been a preparation. You have seemed to like me" —

"I have liked you extremely," said Milly with perfect sweetness. "I should hate very much to give you up as a friend, for I depend on you for opinions and ideas on all sorts of subjects."

"If you could bring yourself to make a place for me in your life," said Ruff, wiping his eyeglasses, which were suffused with mist and blinded him, — "if I could be always at your side, prompting,

guiding, combining, — I could make your house a centre of conversation, wit " —

" I see," murmured Milly, " you are ambitious to have a salon. Now do you know, Mr. Ruff, I never was ambitious to have a salon. As it is, people bore me to extinction."

" Do I bore you to extinction ? "

" No, not generally, — not until you suggested this unlucky topic. Let us talk about something else, — anything else. Have you heard about " —

" Mrs. Childe, you do not know, — you do not begin to know my sensations. This has cut me to the heart."

" There comes papa," said Milly.

" But tell me, are you quite certain " —

" Absolutely certain," said Milly relentlessly. " Well, papa, how many cups of tea did cousin Agnes give you ? "

Mr. Childe sat down and began talking at once. He had seen Mr. Ferris, who had told him of an amendment now before Congress likely to depreciate stock and make the whole social fabric totter. Now modern politics were to Mr. Childe a mere juggler's trick for getting hold of the valuables in one's pockets, and by some open chicanery or sleight of hand transferring them to the sleeve of the manipulator. He never heard of a new bill before the state Assembly or national Congress without suggesting some plan for simplifying matters, so that honest men might hold their own.

" I should like to be at the head of affairs for

one year," he now remarked to Ruff, "and I assure you I should make a revolution. When I think of that mob of fellows in Washington with their hands in the Treasury, voting away thousands and tens of thousands of dollars for every sort of job that tickles their constituents, and then when I go on to reflect that the same sort of thieving on a reduced scale is going on in each of the — How many States are there in this country, Ruff?"

"Forty-two, I believe."

"There used to be twenty-eight when I went to school," grumbled Mr. Childe. "But no matter, the more there are the more thieves there are. Well, as I say, if I were at the head of affairs I would put all the members of the two houses of Congress and of all the state Assemblies into a leaky ship together, send them out into mid-ocean, and scuttle it. With these legislators out of the way there might be a chance."

"A chance for whom?"

"For honest men."

"Not the least in the world. It would simply afford a chance for the other politicians anxious to get into your drowned rascals' shoes."

"Then I would send another ship, and another, and another, and have one, too, for all aldermen and common councilmen."

"With all my heart," said Ruff blandly. "And after that what should you propose to do? Set up as Kaiser?"

"I don't want any more responsibility. And when the rascals are all disposed of, we can get along easily and comfortably, without either laws or rules."

Ruff took his leave. Indeed, he could hardly hold up his head, and he went home and sat down helplessly. He could not yet take in the extent of the calamity which had befallen him; he could not even decide as to the degree of consideration with which his pretensions had been treated. Certainly she had most successfully dissembled her love. And after all, is it necessary to know the exact calibre of the cannon-ball which takes one's head off? His head was gone: there could be no doubt of that, and he could not yet recover from this attitude of open-mouthed surprise.

Even after a night's sleep he was singularly depressed. His mental vision began to clear, however, and he realized that he had not done the thing in the best way. He had not fully grasped his idea, which he had been in the habit of stowing away in some unreachable pigeon-hole of his brain, and at the moment could only fumble after it. He had been stiff and dull, whereas he had expected to dazzle with sallies of wit, to charm by far-reaching suggestions, holding in reserve a delicate touch of pathos. What on earth had ailed him? The fact was, probably, that he was in the habit of addressing the public in the abstract, as it were, and thus had not adjusted his full powers to the task of conquering the concrete woman before

him, — a human being composed of instincts, sensations, likings, repugnances, tastes, sympathies, a few definite ideas, and a whole chaos of romantic imaginings. While he spoke he ought to have remembered that his each word and look created some impression, which harmonized with, or was opposed to, certain preconceived notions of what she wanted in a second marriage. She was not a young girl. Evidently she could look at a suitor without perturbations of spirit, estimate him, test him, even compare him with others. Now that Ruff was in a logical frame of mind, remembering her former husband's languid elegance and egoistic valetudinarianism, he was ready to predict infallibly, after the event, that Lee Childe's widow would insist on fervid bubblings of passion, the raptures of a Romeo.

"I suppose," he said to himself, his irritation growing every moment, "that what she wanted was that I should have gone down on my knees to her."

It was while he was still chewing this cud of bitterness that Mr. Joshua Venn dropped in at his office to make some inquiries about Sidney Breck. The lawyer was cautious, extremely cautious, and advanced to his subject under cover of Mrs. Lee Childe's expensive building projects. Mr. Breck had, he said, suggested alterations in the Berkshire house which would necessitate a considerable outlay; would he — he appealed to Ruff — be justified in advising his client to commit herself to the

clever inventions of an ambitious young architect, whose senior partner was at present engaged in Washington? No man alive could exceed Holly Ruff in the capacity of seeing through a millstone, and he instantly understood that Mr. Joshua Venn was afraid that his client was more than a little run away with by a personal interest in the young partner of the firm of Champion and Breck. He would have scorned to take a mean advantage of a rival when asked about his character.

"Sidney Breck is as honest a fellow as ever breathed," he said. "He spent five years in Paris, between the ages of seventeen and twenty-two, that I cannot answer for. He had four hundred and fifty dollars to live on, and by turns, no doubt, alternately feasted and starved, as art students do, according to the way their pockets are filled. He worked hard at the Ecole des Beaux Arts and at the atelier, that I know; and a young fellow cannot work as he did unless he puts his heart into it, as well as his strength. I don't say he was a saint or an angel. I dare say he learned a good many things not in the course of the Ecole des Beaux Arts. But I do not believe he learned anything which is not useful to a man who has to live in this world. As I say, I can't really vouch for those five years in Paris, yet I would be ready to swear by Breck all through, for I have known him ever since he came to New York, — known him well, and I think better of him than I do of myself, — I would trust him sooner."

Mr. Venn remarked dryly that he was very glad to hear that the young man had a good character, and, after some curt thanks, went away. Left alone, Ruff stamped about his room in the clutches of a new idea. It was grotesque; he laughed at it; he thrust it away; he stamped on it, and yet the spectre remained unsubdued. While he was still fighting this phantom, he was startled by the advent of the very person whom he suddenly felt a fierce anxiety to see.

"May I come in?" asked Sidney Breck at the door. At the sight of the bright, joyous young fellow, Ruff experienced an acute sense of his own undeserved sufferings.

"I am afraid I shall interrupt you," said Breck.

"Interrupt away. Some days are given up to the foul fiend, and there are only interruptions. I have not done a stroke of work, and evidently shall not accomplish a stroke of work. Come in and sit down."

Breck sat down. He never expected meaningless suavity from Ruff, so thought this greeting nothing particular.

"I wanted to ask you a question," he said. "It is a foolish trifle, still" —

"I will try to 'answer a fool according to his folly.'"

"Do. What I wanted to ask was this: I am to dine with Mrs. Childe to-night, — that is, I am to take a drawing for her to look at, and stay to dinner. Now, under such circumstances, ought I or ought I not to wear my dress clothes?"

"Have you or have you not cut your eye-teeth? Can you or can you not walk alone?" said Ruff, who had removed his eyeglasses and now turned and glared at his visitor with his near-sighted eyes.

"You see I cannot."

"I supposed any fool knew that a man is supposed to put on his dress clothes, if he owns any, to dine with a lady, and at a house like that, where" —

"What I felt was this," said Breck "that perhaps when I was actually fulfilling a business engagement I ought not to" —

"Don't talk about tweedle-dum and tweedle-dee," said Ruff. "Of course wear your evening clothes. I should be ashamed of you else."

"Thank you, old fellow. I knew you would tell me exactly what to do."

"Do you see Mrs. Childe often?" asked Ruff, fiercely rubbing his eyeglasses.

"'Often?'" repeated Breck doubtfully. "I don't exactly know what you call 'often.'"

Already feverish and fretful, Ruff turned on him in a storm of indignation.

"I call often often. You will see her to-night. When did you see her last?"

"Two or three days ago. That is, it will be two days this afternoon," said Breck.

"Two or three days ago, — that is, the two days will be up by this afternoon," said Ruff with a mirthless laugh. "You remind me of an Irishman

I met in the street. 'Give me a sixpence for the love of God,' said he, 'to buy a sip of whiskey. I have not had a drop since yesterday, and to-morrow will be the third day.'"

Breck also laughed in a half-embarrassed way.

"Look here, youngster," said Ruff, who had by this time polished his eyeglasses to his heart's content, and now, putting them on, turned the double lens on his victim. "You are falling in love with that woman."

Breck stared at the other a moment, all the color receding from his face. He opened his lips to speak, but no words came.

"Did it ever occur to you what it means to fall in love with a woman worth millions? How much have you got in the world?"

"Ten thousand dollars," gasped Breck, as if aghast.

"Are you looking forward," Ruff pursued with a dry smile, "to marrying Mrs. Childe?"

Breck hung his head.

"No," he said in a low voice.

"Well, then, what do you expect?"

"I expect nothing. Good God, I don't understand you, Ruff."

"Other people seem to," observed Ruff pointedly.

"Do you allude to yourself?"

"I assure you no such idea would ever have lodged in my brain unless it had been put there by somebody else. To begin with, you seem to me a mere boy compared with her."

"I am ten months her senior," said Breck eagerly.

"She is a hundred years older than you are in knowledge of the world," said Ruff. "She is not thinking of marrying any one. She could have no object in marrying except to secure a title. I have known her for twelve years. I saw her all through her married life. I knew her husband. I saw just the terms they were on."

"What were the terms they were on?" asked Breck, a flush rising to his forehead.

"At the start she was afraid of him, anxious to please him. Next she tried to surprise him, pique him, dazzle him. Then she found out that he was ill, and she would have nursed him devotedly if he had permitted it. He had a valet whose ministrations he preferred. I tell you she had plenty of mental experience in her married life. At first she was trampled on, then she turned round ready to trample on others. I don't suppose any human being is born without heart, but hers was used up in the ordeal she went through. She has not an atom of heart now. She is all intellect, all caprice, all ambition. Anything novel interests her, and you are a novelty. She will lead you on, turn you inside out, amuse herself with your romantic worship, then break your heart. I don't care so much about that. What I do mind is your being stigmatized as an adventurer in pursuit of her money."

Breck tried to speak, but it was as if his tongue were paralyzed.

"Well, what is it?" demanded Ruff inflexibly.

"Your imagination carries you away," Breck contrived to stammer.

"See that yours does not," said Ruff, with a straight look into the young face, which had lost all its glow. The eyes were dilated, and the nostrils quivered as if nature were at a severe strain. "You see," Ruff pursued, urged on to hammer in obvious truths until they touched the quick, "you know little of the world, and don't begin to comprehend what it is for a woman to be so rich that everything lies within her reach; beautiful beyond other women, with an assured place in the great world, twenty-seven years old, and a widow. She has been everywhere, seen everything. What she has not done she has read about, and what has she not thought? She is the sort of woman who wants cherries in mid-winter and snow-banks in summer; if she goes into a shop, she asks for what they have not got. You don't begin to measure her possible caprice; yet you actually believe that you are pleasing her. The moment you tell her you expect to marry her" —

"The moment I tell her I expect to marry her," said Breck in hot wrath, "she may dismiss me as a lunatic."

"She will dismiss you, no doubt of that. Perhaps you have been deceiving yourself by the belief that you nurse no actual hopes of winning her, but the hope is kindled and burns in your mind the whole time. Your fancy is heated by

the idea of her; you may think you are planning a country house, but it is only a castle in Spain enveloped in a diaphanous and rosy mist, from behind which a magical dawn is likely to break any moment. How can you help thinking of such a woman? When she turns towards you, you are ready to go on your knees to her!"

"Please dismiss the pronoun 'you' from your statement," struck in Breck, who was beginning to rally his scattered forces, "as if you were describing me, for I don't go with you at all. When I am in danger of going on my knees to any woman alive, I will come and tell you."

"When I say 'you,'" said Holly Ruff, "I mean a man with blood and not water in his veins. Such a man would be pretty sure to worship her."

"I should say you were in love with her yourself!"

"I am sufficiently in love to know where the rocks lie. I have been in your place, youngster, and I advise you as a friend not to be passion's slave, but to look the question in the face as if it were the case of another man. Can you afford to go on falling in love with her, — burning incense to her coquetry, — and, worse than all, being branded by all who look on as a presumptuous fortune-hunter? There, now, I have spoken as your true friend ought to speak; I trust you are not offended."

"I am not in the least offended," said Breck fiercely.

"It is natural enough," Ruff went on, "that when she singles out a bright young fellow in this way he should grow ambitious. Of course, what a man looks for and watches in the vault of heaven is his own star."

"I don't agree with you," said Breck. "There is such a thing as disinterestedness."

"I don't know where you will find it," Ruff retorted. "We somehow have to eat and drink, provide lodging and raiment, and we all are impatient to do it in the handsomest way. We always say that when we have any superfluities we will be generous, but what mortal has enough? Now I have preached my preach. I should not have taken the trouble to do it for any one else, but the truth is, Breck, I 'm fond of you, — you 're like a younger brother. I should not like to have you come to grief."

"I am grateful to you," said Breck dryly. "Since you are a sort of elder brother, I may as well confide the fact to you that the only woman on earth whom I have ever thought of as my wife is Miss Anita Rivera."

"I congratulate you with all my heart," said Ruff, wringing his friend's hand with an air of relief.

Breck did not stop to correct any possible false impression left on the mind of his mentor. All he wished for was to be outside this torture-chamber, and telling Ruff that he was in haste he left at once.

Once on the pavement outside, he stamped his foot angrily, and said aloud: —

"The trouble with Holly Ruff is that he is a beast." The phrase pleased him, and he repeated it more than once, indifferent whether or no he was overheard in the din of Broadway. Then, as he was ascending the stairs which led to his own office, he added: —

"Did I ask for any of his beastly interference? Did I? I'll be —— if I did."

In fact, the young architect was in a very great rage.

VI.

For an hour or two Breck felt that no power on earth should induce him to go near Mrs. Childe that evening. Then, as the first glow of his indignation faded away, he tried to look at the situation more justly. He conceded that Ruff was a true friend, — a clever man, penetrating and at times unamiable; still, he knew the world as only a man who has an unworldly streak in him can know it. Examining his own conscience, Breck had to confess that he needed just this raking fore and aft, and that half his wrath had come from his reluctance at being forced to show his true colors and define his course. He had by this known Mrs. Childe seven weeks, and had seen her in all thirteen times. Not only that, but he constantly looked forward to seeing her, and was restless if he did not see her. Indeed, he had so often made excursions to the Park to gain a glimpse of her, that she nowadays watched for him as she took her daily drive with Mr. Childe, and some three or four times had stopped her carriage and sent the man to invite him to get in. On two of these occasions he had gone back with her, dined, and stayed till midnight. She had asked him to sing, and he had sung to her. Afterwards,

when he lay sleepless, he had explained to himself that it was the music which had excited him.

In fact, it was high time that Ruff should have dragged him before a tribunal and administered a stinging rebuke. When a man ceases to remember what he knows by heart, he needs a sharp lesson. Breck had been charmed by Mrs. Lee Childe the first moment he saw her. Then she had sent for him, and the plans for the country house had been a ready-made excuse, a permanent apology, an excellent sedative to conscience. He knew very well, however, that there had been nothing professional, nothing perfunctory, in the way he had remembered how once that little soft, white hand had fluttered to his, alighting for a moment like a dove. In all his life nothing so charming had come to pass to him. It was the only time she had shown sympathy and comprehension in just that way, but there were a hundred other memories as subtle and almost as sweet. They had talked; sometimes Mrs. Childe had questioned and he had answered; then, again, it had been she who had most to say. But let one or the other talk, the other listened as if under the charm, — each seemed to have waited for the other to solve the problem. Breck had felt this; intellectually they were in wonderful sympathy. He had wondered that he was so completely at ease in her presence, for he had never seen a more imposing woman. She was often severe, and was not at all slow to express impatience and sarcasm

towards the world in general; but, although he recognized her capacity for being haughty, he easily understood that she was rather timid with those she liked, that she had an intense longing to please, and that her eyes, smile, and voice could suggest a sweetness which made other women seem cold.

He found out now that he had been studying her; that he had said to himself, "She is a woman who is tired of being lonely, and who longs for love and companionship. She will not give her heart easily, but let her give it, and with it she gives herself at once and forever. She has made one mistake, and she will be careful to make no more mistakes."

This was what he had been saying to himself of late; now, in the light which Holly Ruff had suddenly turned in upon his vague, fluctuating, incomplete ideas, he longed to escape from the truth disclosed. He writhed at the conviction of his own vanity and self-complacency. Ruff might well have inquired how he expected the situation to resolve itself if he counted on marrying Mrs. Childe. It seemed to Breck as if all his resolution and self-respect shriveled up before this revelation of his absurd vanity and presumption. He had governed himself before. Nature, in her lavish output of force, gives men faculties, aspirations, and talents without offering any favoring circumstances for their development. There are those who, when they see an obstacle in their way,

egoistically decide that it shall not spoil their career, so carry out their own wishes to fulfillment with a strong hand and an iron heel. Breck, however, was nothing if not conscientious. Years before, he had resigned his ambition to be a painter, and after his first struggle had found a real satisfaction in the reflection that he had given up the dearest wish of his life for his sister's sake; that he had denied himself not only his art, but ease, self-indulgence, desultory tastes, and had adhered rigidly to the routine he had relentlessly mapped out.

And now in this moment of revolt against the calumny that he was trying to marry a rich woman, who would presently laugh at his suit, the stoic within him awoke. He was not a mere vain coxcomb. He could appoint boundaries to himself; he could bid the seas retire.

Being a stoic, he felt that it was safe to go to Mrs. Childe's to dinner. As he rang the bell, a little coupé darted up to the curbstone, a man alighted with the unquestioning zeal of a guest who feels himself behind time, and ran up the steps.

"Did you ring?" he asked in a voice that Breck recognized.

"Yes," said Breck, "I rang. Good-evening, Mr. Norreys."

"Oh, is it you, Breck? How are you? Are you of the party? I was afraid I was late."

They were admitted; their overcoats were solemnly removed by Wilkins, who waved his hand

towards the small drawing-room. Norreys led the way, and Breck followed as if in a dream. Mr. Childe was standing on the hearth-rug discoursing to Mrs. Fletcher, and under the glow of a tall, crimson-draped lamp Mrs. Childe was sitting on a sofa talking to Miss Hurst. It was evidently a dinner-party, and Breck felt that in some way he had bungled. He must have mistaken the day or the hour, for he had been asked to bring the plans of the country house and discuss them quietly. He felt his face flame, and the blood tingled even to his finger-tips at the thought of having forced himself upon this intimate coterie. But Mrs. Childe advanced as if she expected him. She greeted Mr. Norreys with a smile and some easy phrase, then turned to Breck and held out her hand, saying, —

"So good of you to come. I shall give Miss Hurst to you; see that you talk to her."

As she spoke, she bent her head a little on one side and looked at him with a peculiar glance whose roguishness perplexed him. It was all a riddle. Was this expression friendly sweetness and intimate fun at an odd situation, or a planned triumph to show him that she had only been playing with his earnestness? He felt that he would rather have died than have permitted her to gain the faintest clew to what was in his thoughts.

He simply bowed and said, "At your orders," and she looked at him questioningly. She was magnificently attired, and her dress gave force to

all Holly Ruff's exhortations. He needed just this lesson, he said to himself. Hitherto she had been dressed much like everyday people, perhaps with more studied simplicity. To-night, for the first time, he saw her in full evening toilette. Her gown was of some material he could only have described as cloth of silver embroidered with violets; the petticoat he recognized as Venetian point lace. The corsage was low in front, and her beautiful arms were bare; at each shoulder was a diamond clasp. She wore a girdle studded with precious stones, and there was a diamond aigrette in her golden brown hair. Every detail of the splendid toilette seemed to burn itself into Breck's perceptions, and the easy repose of her manner was an affront.

"Are you going to the ball?" Miss Hurst inquired as they sat down at table. No, he replied, he never went to balls. When she asked him why he stayed away he said that perhaps it was that a crowd was so fatal to a woman's beauty, to say nothing of her style and individuality. One gown puts out another.

"For example," he remarked, "you have on a charming costume of shrimp color, but contrasted with rose pink or true yellow where will it be?"

"You alarm me," said Miss Hurst. "I have often felt myself thin away into insignificance at a ball where all my favorite partners danced with other girls, and my dearest foes had all the good times. I see now what the matter was, — I had

chosen my gown unfortunately. How about Mrs. Childe's? Will that hold its own?"

"Mrs. Childe will triumph in spite of her gown," said Breck.

"Do you intend to suggest that it is not the loveliest thing you ever saw in your life?"

"It would be too old, — that is, if she did not look so young."

"That is what I told you, Milly," Mr. Childe struck in. "Too gorgeous altogether. Only fit for a dowager."

"Mrs. Childe, I come to your relief," said Whiley Norreys. "Your gown is superb, also fitting. I may say, too, that my opinion of a woman's toilette is worth having, for it is based on exact knowledge."

Breck, who experienced more and more a sense of revolt, felt at the same time his spirits rise. His annoyance took the form of mischief, and he played the pranks of a saucy boy. He declared that Mr. Norreys's speech had charmed him, only it stopped short on the brink of interesting revelations. How does a man gain an exact knowledge about a woman's gowns? He pressed questions as to the exact number of gowns Norreys had been intimately acquainted with; insisted upon definite particulars; would allow no vagueness, no haziness. Norreys took the cue and discoursed on the gowns he had known, of many of which he had been the inspirer. Breck attacked him from first one and then the other flank, prodding his memory with questions

which seemed to show an impish knowledge of all the other's little adventures. In fact, he longed to do or say something audacious, which should shock every one at table. The effect he produced, however, was of cutting boyish capers out of mere fun and high spirits. Everybody laughed, Milly each moment growing more animated; a blush crept into her cheeks and her eyes were full of a happy light. Whiley Norreys, wound up to the point of talking, freely told one story after another, each of the sort which could be told, of course, with himself always as central figure.

"I never had the least idea you were so successful with the women, Norreys," remarked Mr. Childe with admiration. "I wonder how you managed it. I will say I have slain my thousands, but you have slain your tens of thousands."

"Just think of a man's being satisfied with one love affair after hearing these boasts," said Georgy Hurst. "However, I myself prefer a more concentrated form of devotion. I do not wish to be anybody's one hundred and eleventh."

"Women are so insatiable," said Mr. Childe. "That is why I wonder at Whiley's good luck. How did he contrive to satisfy any one of them?"

"I take it," said Norreys modestly, "that it is the happy province of certain men to throw more depth of feeling into the art of kissing a woman's hand, or putting her cloak on her shoulders, than other men can show by a whole lifetime of devotion."

"I call that sort of fellow dangerous, very dangerous," said Mr. Childe, wagging his head.

"What I wonder at, Whiley," Mrs. Fletcher said, "is that, with all these successes, you were not married long ago. I always say, however, that the man who has many love affairs has a cold heart."

"A cold heart!" repeated Norreys, with some natural indignation. "No woman ever said that of me."

"No, indeed," said Miss Hurst. "To be sure I never made any impression upon it myself, but"—

"You don't know, Miss Georgy," retorted Norreys. "If I have not married hitherto, it has been because"—

"Because you were too magnanimous," remarked Milly. "Marriage is such a selfish institution."

"Partly that," Norreys conceded. "I did not wish to marry too soon. Then I am nothing if not fastidious."

"I wish you would tell us what your requirements are, Mr. Norreys," said Breck demurely. "One would like to know whether they could or could not be fulfilled."

"My wishes are not immoderate," returned Norreys. "To begin with"—

"To begin with, her face is her fortune, I suppose," said Georgy Hurst.

"Well, I do not want too beautiful a wife"—

"Then I am out of the question," murmured Milly.

"Nor too poor a wife," proceeded Norreys, not catching the words.

"Then he does not mean me," said Georgy.

"I suppose you want one of suitable age, and discreet," put in Mrs. Fletcher.

"Don't get one who is too discreet," said Mr. Childe. "My wife was the soul of discretion, — never told me anything."

Norreys bowed, smiled, and took it all in such good part, that Breck blushed to think of his own pettishness. The dinner was not a long one, and the moment it was over he pleaded an engagement and took leave. He had hardly met Mrs. Childe's eyes since he came in until now, when she held out her hand.

"If you will go," she said in a low voice, "we might easily take you to the ball if you will come with us."

"Oh, no, no," he said with decision. It would not have been easy for her to understand the expression of his face; she had little idea of what feelings were behind the fire in his eyes, and why he looked so pleading, so handsome, and yet so defiant.

"Will you come again very soon?" she asked. "Perhaps to-morrow night?"

"Not to-morrow night," he returned. When he found himself in the street he accused himself of roughness, of bad manners. He would have been amazed if he had heard those he had left behind extolling him to the skies: a charming young fellow; no egotism, no self-sufficiency, possessing some sense of humor, willing to listen and enjoy,

and not criticise the universe. Meanwhile, he felt himself plunged in chaos. All his impressions seemed to be shifting and changing; black seemed white, and white black. He could not understand why Mrs. Childe had included him in the dinner-party, which was a mere tryst where her friends gathered to take her to the ball. He was ready to accuse her of all the cruelty and coquetry which Holly Ruff had ascribed to her. She had dressed herself like a queen, and then had looked at him with that half-mischievous air as if asking how he liked her royal trappings. He said to himself that he began to understand; and he stamped his foot on the pavement. She was, after all that was imputed to her, good-natured; she possessed frankness and independence of character, and the truth was, when she saw that he had been so much encouraged by her kindness as actually to think of — of being in love with her, she had taken this means of bringing him to his senses. A man would be bold, indeed, who would dream of taking the hand of the woman he had seen that evening — of — He could not formulate his whole thought, for his blood seemed to be on fire in his veins. He wished, instead, to put away from his mind every suggestion of Mrs. Childe, as a temptation against which he must struggle. Some secret bitterness born of a feeling of defeat and mortification mingled with his resentment.

It was something to have his course mapped out. Miss Rivera shone like a beacon out of the

darkness, beckoning and offering a refuge. Yes, he would go to Anita; he would tell her that he wanted her for his wife. That was his only true course. What a man imperatively needed was something absolutely his own, — a young girl whose love belonged to him from the first thrill of sensation. How dared a man love a widow? How could he love her? Breck asked himself these questions with a sort of cynicism as if trying to convince himself that he was thoroughly disenchanted. He could only love a woman with the first maiden bloom on her lips, — no other man must ever have claimed her, must ever have admired her.

With this fierce determination to settle his uncertainties by engaging himself to Anita before he slept, he experienced fresh disappointment and rebuff when, on entering the Riveras' apartment, he found the Italian music-master talking eagerly to his pupil, while he walked up and down the room gesticulating violently, now and then stopping to strike the table a blow, whether in wrath or merely by way of emphasis Breck could not at first determine. Signor Contarini was a Lombard, large and fair, with a round head, a broad face, large brilliant blue eyes, and a huge mustache, which curled up at the corners after the fashion of some once powerful European potentates'. His ample waistcoat was cut low, as if with a view of displaying dazzling white linen and an azure scarf in which was stuck a pin containing

diamonds of surprising size. He glanced impatiently towards Breck as he entered, but did not interrupt his harangue.

"Ze voice," he was saying, "is an instrument like ze ozzer instruments, only it is more delicate, and it suffers from being incased, not in a baize bag, not in a box, but in ze human frame, which is exposed to every danger. You would not t'ink of putting a violin where ze rough airs, ze harsh contact, could touch its strings. But you take no such care of your voice, alzough ze least annoyance, ze faintest breat' of feeling, may injure it fatally. I ask you, Miss Rivera, to watch yourself until to-morrow like some precious commodity, like" —

"Oh, Mr. Breck," exclaimed Miss Rivera suddenly, catching sight of her visitor, and running towards him with outstretched hands. "I am actually engaged to sing at a concert at Schumann Hall to-morrow afternoon."

"Is it possible?" said Breck with dismay; then feeling as if he were permitting his selfish disappointment to retard the free play of his sympathies, he said to Contarini, as they shook hands, "I hope your pupil will have a great success."

"I tell her," said the Italian, "zat zere are tree sooccesses, — ze succès d'estime, ze grand succès, and ze succès magnifique, colossal."

"I hope Miss Rivera's will be the succès magnifique, colossal," said Breck.

"I shall be zat-is-fied wiz ze grand succès,"

said Contarini. "A succès colossal at ze outset" — he made a gesture of dismissing it to limbo — "may be a meesfortune colossal."

"Have it a grand succès by all means. Just enough to stimulate without making her believe that she does not need to go on working hard."

"No need to go on working hard?" shrieked Contarini. "Zere is every need. What is accomplished genius? A long toil, an endless fast!"

"Yes, yes," said Breck soothingly. "We all know that. Miss Rivera understands that she has embarked on a career which necessitates absolute self-abnegation. She never even eats a bonbon nowadays. But I am curious to hear how this wonderful good fortune has come about."

He was at once informed that Anita was to sing at the début of Fräulein Lemcke, the violinist, a youthful prodigy, a pupil of Herr Joachim's, who had been brought over by Bayliss, the clever impresario whose undertakings had as a rule met with distinguished success. Fräulein Lemcke was to be assisted by her regular accompanist, Benski, Zriny the pianoforte virtuoso, Herr Weil, a favorite baritone of the Wagner school, and Mlle. Dampier, the soprano. Unluckily, Mlle. Dampier had fallen ill, at Albany, of congestion of the lungs, and Bayliss, compelled to look up another singer, had gone to Contarini in despair, declaring that not a soprano was attainable. The Italian at once told him he had a promising pupil ready to be launched, Miss Rivera had been sent for and had

sung with a charm and brilliancy which delighted Bayliss, who not only had engaged her for the next afternoon's performance, but threw out hints as to the possibility of including her in his company. It could hardly be wondered at that Miss Rivera walked on air, and felt that all her dreams were coming to pass, and, looking at her, Breck said to himself that no matter how she sang at the concert, if she only looked as pretty as she looked to-night all New York would be ready to applaud her. He inquired about the Fräulein.

"Oh, a fright," said Miss Rivera. "Thirty at least, I should say from her appearance, although they proclaim her as a youthful phenomenon. She has straw-colored hair, her nose is so thick," measuring some inches on her own pretty hands, "and her complexion is muddy."

"She has good eyes," struck in Contarini, "she has eyes like ze forget-me-nots of her native land."

"I did not see them," said Miss Rivera, with a half shrug; "she did not trouble herself to raise them to look at me. But I could see her ill-fitting clothes. Such a figure! Dowdy! No distinction!"

"Find out ze charm of her, not ze faults," said Contarini with a warning forefinger. "Do not t'ink of her as a rival. She has ze virtuosity, she has ze technique, she has ze love for art; let it help yours. You do not wish to surpass her. You are both of ze same profession; you have ze

same ambition to make ze sympat'y of your audience t'rill wiz a sense of all that is lofty and beautiful in ze music."

"Yes, that is it," said Breck. "No jealousy; no competition. In fact, there could be none, any more than a painter feels towards a sculptor."

"I am not jealous of Fräulein Lemcke," said Miss Rivera; "I really am very grateful to her. Only as the papers talk about her as a girl in her teens, I was a little taken aback by the sight of a woman at least half a dozen years older than I am, in an ugly brown ulster and a Derby hat. I am sure I wish her all success, — a most brilliant début."

"You may safely wish her a brilliant début," observed Contarini with emphasis. "Her success will be your ladder. She will light ze match which sends up your rocket. See that you keep it a blazing torch in ze zenit'."

"Perhaps I might have succeeded even if the Fräulein had never been born," said Miss Rivera with a toss of her head.

"Perhaps! Do not be too sure. Do not be carried away. T'ink not of ze Fräulein, but of your art; not of your public, but of your teacher, who has tried to implant ze eternal principles of trut', of beauty, of great music. Zis is ze grand experiment. Perhaps, who knows, you will one day say, 'Before I sang at zat first concert I did walk on my two feet, after zat I did have a cab, and now — I have a barouche magnifique wiz two horses.'"

"Four! four!" cried Anita. "I insist upon having four at least!" But Contarini's speech had been uttered in benediction at the door, which he had now closed behind him.

Breck, left alone with the girl whom he had decided it was his duty to ask to be his wife, felt his heart beat. He was excited, and could have put spirit into almost any rôle he attempted. Still, he was not so wholly dominated by his resolution as to be blind to the fact that this was not an auspicious moment for making love to Anita, who was in a state of youthful exultation as she saw opening before her the destiny of which she had long dreamed. Sentiment, passion, were to her as if they did not exist. He was quite certain that she would rather have a column of praise in the morning paper than the tenderest love confession. What she was dreaming of was success, honors, adulation, riches. Still resolute, although he was to control circumstances instead of being controlled by them, he might have gone on to state his views in logical order if Anita had given him the opportunity. She no doubt attributed the fire in his eyes and the peculiar softness of his manner to their just cause, and it added to her elation to realize that nothing failed her in this happy moment. Although admirers might be a superfluity, it was something to have an impassioned auditor who would listen to her overflow of feeling, sympathize with her excitement, and help her to realize the far-reaching meanings of this unique opportunity.

Breck after a while adjusted his intellect and imagination to the practical exigencies of the situation.

"I suppose you have some adorable gown to wear," he ventured to remark.

"Oh, yes. Months ago Maddy insisted that I should be prepared for any emergency, and we bought a yellow satin. She is so clever about such things; she made it for me herself."

Breck shuddered. He remembered certain tea-gowns worn by Mrs. Hugh Rivera, ambitiously designed on great models.

"I hope it is exactly the right thing," he said anxiously.

"I will try it on if you like," Miss Rivera returned graciously.

Breck caught eagerly at the suggestion, and when Mrs. Hugh Rivera, on being called in for consultation, demurred slightly, he argued with a persistency which reminded him of Whiley Norreys's pretensions that he was the best possible judge of a gown.

"I do not consider that any man can have any clear comprehension of such matters," said Mrs. Rivera. "Hugh makes the most absurd criticisms on my prettiest dresses. However" —

She yielded, and went off with her sister-in-law to put on the yellow satin which was to help or hinder the young singer in her first appearance on the stage. Left alone, Breck sat down at the piano and struck a few notes; but they jarred

upon him. Like a soul in trouble, he started up, and began to pace up and down the few feet of area the small crowded room afforded. A phantom seemed suddenly to have risen, and it confronted him with the aspect Mrs. Childe had worn when he met her that evening. He seemed to see her lovely clear features filled with that wonderfully sweet and truthful expression he had never found in any other woman's face. She looked at him archly, smiling as if some joke lay behind his finding her surrounded by guests and wearing such a splendid gown. While he had been sitting beside her at table, he had taken pains never to look at her, but now her image was close beside him; he could see nothing else; it was absolutely life-like, — even to the dimple on her elbow. A sense of her beauty, of her manner, gave him a thrill at once delicious and painful. Tears rose to his eyes; they blinded him, and he stumbled over a chair.

"Are you getting impatient?" called a gay voice from the next room. "We are almost ready."

He stamped his foot. He could hardly believe his own weakness. He had never expected to play such a part. He suddenly absolved Mrs. Childe from any crime he had imputed to her. She was good, sweet, natural, — wholly without the worldliness that cheapened most women. If he had fallen in love with her, if from the first moment he had met her he could not turn his eyes

from her face, could never hear enough of her voice, could never tire of talking to her, feeling impelled to tell her all he had ever felt, known, and seen, it was not her fault. It was that he was young, that he was lonely, — that for the first time he felt that he understood and could love a woman, and that she loved and could understand him. She had kindled an intense thirst for happiness in him. Happiness! happiness! that was what he had longed for; that was what seemed before him when he waited, freezing, in the street to gain glimpses of her, — when he went to see her, when she advanced towards him with that delightful movement he was never tired of watching. But what happiness meant he had never put into exact words. Holly Ruff had done that for him. Only what is unexpected happens in life; he had never supposed himself likely to be accused of being a fortune-hunter.

With the impassioned rapidity of youth, he determined to retrace his steps. "The man who has vigor may walk to the east just as well as to the west, if he chance to turn his head that way," said Dr. Johnson. Breck had told Holly Ruff that the only woman he had ever thought of marrying was Miss Rivera, and he would prove his honesty and consistency by giving himself up to the thought of this young girl exclusively. A man wanders about alone, perishing from thirst after happiness, an agonizing and secret thirst which he believes can only be answered by attain-

ing to the region of some far-off glittering star; when all the while, at his side, within reach of his hand-clasp, is exactly what his whole nature craves. He and Anita belonged to the same class, — artistic, educated, acute, bent on making each spark of talent they possessed find its equivalent in money and reputation. This pretty, proud, ambitious girl could not count too assuredly on success, and she needed some one to smooth the rough places for her. His real place was at her side. He had unspent powers of work in him. The goad of necessity was what he needed, and must not the goad of necessity be always behind good work and great art? He wanted no ease, no wealth, no chance for sleek dilettantism; he wanted incessant, devouring struggle, — hard-earned success. Nothing worth having had ever been done in cold blood.

If only it were all settled. If only Anita realized how much she needed him; if only this foolish chance for singing in public had not momentarily dazzled her, flattering her into the belief that she was to win the great prize of life for herself, with what rapture could he have taken her in his arms at this moment and sworn that he would save her from the hard experience he coveted for himself.

At this moment Anita emerged from the inner room with the assured step of an Atalanta who feels strength to run her own race and win her own goal. She looked so handsome that Breck gazed at her as if spell-bound; her eyes were full

of light, her cheeks warm in color, her smile expressed youthful, triumphant happiness. She wore a pale yellow gown trimmed with a wealth of lace, — lace was invariably a strong point in Mrs. Rivera's costumes; the effect might be a little overdone, but the tall, well-shaped figure could easily carry off some display of magnificence.

"How do you like it, Mr. Breck?" Mrs. Rivera inquired anxiously. The girl did not need to ask; she read the story of her beauty in the young fellow's eyes.

"I like it extremely," Breck murmured. "There can be no doubt it is a handsome gown, and very becoming. That pale yellow suits the complexion."

"I want to be well dressed," said Miss Rivera, "and if I have any good looks I do not want them spoiled by some color which does not go with my dark skin."

"It seems to be an evening gown," ventured Breck timidly. "I suppose, however, it is the correct thing to wear at an afternoon concert."

"Oh, yes," said Mrs. Rivera with the ease of assured knowledge. "Singers always wear full dress. You are sure you like it, Mr. Breck?" she asked again with the jealous instinct of the true artist, detecting some reserve in his admiration.

"Oh, yes," he replied, laughing. "It is of course just the right gown for the occasion, — well chosen, well made, and well worn."

"I took no end of pains," said Mrs. Rivera, with a sigh of relief. "I saw one like it at an 'opening'; that was pale Nile green, not Anita's color at all. I used to go and sit before the show-case day after day and drink it all in until I had every detail by heart. I do believe that this is actually handsomer than the imported dress, although the price of that was said to be four hundred dollars."

"One of these days," said Anita with intense satisfaction in present and future, "I shall order four-hundred-dollar gowns from Paris by the dozen. You shall have some too, Maddy," she added, with a pretty and grateful caress to her sister.

Certainly, it was hardly the moment for Breck to offer marriage when Anita was in a state of mind to order four-hundred-dollar gowns by the dozen. He resigned his aspirations for that night at least.

VII.

He searched row after row of the parquet when he entered the concert hall next day, hoping to find a familiar face. He had begged Holly Ruff to accompany him, but Ruff was too busy a man to be able to sacrifice an afternoon even for Miss Rivera's début. He promised, instead, to bespeak some favorable press notices from certain musical critics at almost any sacrifice of conscience to friendship. This was a point gained, yet Breck longed to divide his agitations, hopes, and fears with some one near at hand. He was anxious about Anita, divining how her heart throbs were measuring out painfully this interval of suspense. It might have been a difficult matter to decide the question of his consistency. He longed to have her succeed in a way to answer her wildest hopes, yet he carried behind this wish the vibrating consciousness that if she failed he was to teach her to welcome defeat, since it brought her nearer to him, permitted him to press sweeter ideals upon her than she had yet known, and to show her that love is enough for a woman. Meanwhile, what was essential was to fulfill the duty of the present moment and suspend every thought of further action until the right moment came. He longed to find an acquaintance whom he might bribe or buy to aid

him in bestowing some sort of recognition upon the young songstress. The seats were chiefly occupied by ladies, who were settling themselves with little movements and gestures suggestive of birds pluming their feathers and sharpening their bills. There was a flutter of programmes and a soft buzz of voices. Two or three mature women glanced back at Breck with the sunny benignity of vision which his youth and good looks perhaps demanded, but they were strangers; all were strangers, and he experienced a hopeless feeling of distance, of isolation. Each seemed so individual, so interested in herself, so well satisfied with herself, so critical of all outside herself, that it was useless to hope for any favorable judgment from any one of them. Not one seemed to realize that this was no mere every-day concert; that the dull, empty stage with its grand piano and music stand was an arena looked forward to with hopes and fears, shivering dread and repugnance, and that although the fair gladiators would not come forth and say, "*Morituri te salutant*," the struggle for life was shortly to take place before the eyes of the indifferent spectators.

However, he was not inspired to frame his appeal to humanity in words, and now, failing to meet a single glance or smile of recognition from any one in the audience, he discontentedly walked back to the door, wondering if perhaps the best thing he could do were not to go behind the scenes and find Anita. Suddenly he gave a start of joyful surprise.

"Poorshaw!" he exclaimed, putting his hand on the shoulder of a young man who was leaning listlessly against the wall. "How glad I am to see you!"

"Hello, Breck, is that you?" said Geddes Poorshaw, staring at the architect with some surprise at the unexpected warmth of his greeting. "How are you? I am glad to see you, too. I was wondering why I had promised to come to this affair. I thought there was not a soul here to speak to."

"I have been looking all over the house for somebody I know, but in vain," said Breck, glowing with pleasure and wringing Poorshaw's hand as if he were some long-lost *fidus Achates*. "If one wants to feel isolated, cut off from humanity, let him enter a crowd of women."

"I prefer one at a time myself," said Poorshaw. "My only reason for being here is, that my sister, Mrs. Floyd, begged me to come in her place, as she is ill. She crossed from Bremen with this girl, and promised to befriend her. She has engaged her to play at a musicale Saturday night. They say New York will go wild over her, — that she is certain to make a sensation."

"Oh, you allude to the German violinist?"

"Whom else?"

"Poorshaw," exclaimed Breck fervently, "do me a favor."

"Of course, anything."

Poorshaw was a big, well-made, ugly fellow, on whom one could depend for a certain indifferent

large-heartedness, and scorn of merely social considerations. Breck and he had been thrown together frequently while the Newport cottages were in progress, but up to the present moment had rarely exchanged an unnecessary word. Friendship, like love, however, answers necessity, and can advance by great strides. Sure of sympathy in his listener, Breck began with vivid picturing and irresistible logic to describe Miss Rivera, and the hard ordeal before her. Perhaps to make the case stronger he refrained from any suggestion that if she were to fail to-day there might exist certain compensations for her. He continued to give Poorshaw a very distinct impression that the girl was poor, almost friendless, forced to earn her own way; that if she could make money by concert singing she was saved, and failing that career she was lost.

"Poor thing," said Poorshaw. "I'll do all I can. I know nothing about music, and care less, but I promise to applaud to the echo, whether she sings like the cherubim and seraphim, or cannot raise a note."

"I want her to feel cheered, not disheartened, as she comes forward," said Breck. "I want her to be certain she has some friends. The infernal thing about being a musician is, that you have not only to have a voice, skill, training, but you have to have experienced nerves."

"Hush, they are beginning. Sit down," said Poorshaw. They went forward and took their

seats in the first row of the balcony circle. Herr Zriny was already at the piano engaged in overcoming the enormous technical difficulties of Schumann's Fantasia, Opus 17. He was followed by Herr Weil, a baritone, who the season before had become a familiar and favorite figure on the operatic stage. He seemed to have secured his place in the hearts of his friends, since to-day he was enabled to make a triumph out of what, judged on its own merits, might have been a dismal failure; for, owing to the fact that he was suffering from a violent cold, his upper notes were uncertain, — worse than uncertain, — his middle register almost inaudible, while his lower tones came out with such preternatural strength that the effect was startling. Feminine verdicts are said to be an affair of the sensibilities only, and probably his fair audience was moved by his dire need of encouragement. They would have insisted on an encore had not the artist himself, with grateful and eloquent gestures, made it clear that such a concession would be at too much cost to his own chest. Sidney Breck could not help experiencing satisfaction at these signs of easy toleration on the part of a house he had suspected of being over-critical. If these women were so complaisant towards a fat, red-faced falsetto, whose voice varied between a painful baritone and a volcanic bass, what would they not do for a young and pretty creature who would trip forward presently in her yellow satin and lace gown, her eyes beaming, her lovely lips

smiling, and her hands holding, with an occasional coquettish gesture, the roll of music which contained the song which would charm all hearts. She was first to sing "*Lascia ch' io pianga*," a somewhat worn, but yet eternally fresh aria. Indeed, Contarini piqued himself on the way he had taught Anita to sing what well done could never be hackneyed. "Every thirty years," it was his wont to say, "a new singer should arise who will sing the old songs. Each generation needs a musical renaissance." The important matter was to sing them out of a new inspiration, discarding the traditions, the conventions of each lyrist, who in turn has made the songs her own. Anita in particular, — of that the music-master was quite certain, — could, with unique genius, gather up the cast-off, half-forgotten melodies, invest them with her own fire and force, and charm the world with nobody could predict what grace of unexpectedness, and novel charm.

However, before Anita's place in the programme was to be filled up by this delightful vision which more and more possessed Breck's mind, the Fräulein Lemcke must appear. Breck, naturally jealous for his own protégée, had taken comfort in the picture Anita had drawn of the violinist. Conceding something to feminine malice, he had expected to see a robust Hanoverian, comparatively of middle age, who would handle her instrument like a saucepan. He could hardly believe his eyes when there was led out a quaintly pretty little creature,

apparently not more than sixteen, dressed in a dark blue frock of cloth and velvet hardly reaching to the ankles. Her masses of wavy flaxen hair, arranged in braids whose long ends fell below her waist, were surmounted by a cap of dark blue velvet set off by a little feather. As she came forward her lips were set in a babyish curve, and when she bowed her appealing blue eyes traveled about the place as if she longed somewhere to find a friend and be sure of some touch of sympathy. She looked so childish, so naive, so pretty, the heart of the audience opened to her on the instant. She was greeted with a spontaneous burst of applause. At this she smiled,— the smile of a happy infant, — and fitted her violin under her soft white chin with such a blissful air of satisfaction that everybody vociferously clapped again; in fact, the little Fräulein's success was assured before she had played a note. Then, as she drew her bow across the strings the impression was deepened. She was not only a charming child, she was a virtuoso. The most captious critic could hardly have found fault with her performance. If it were not marked by clear individuality it yet established the fact that the musician was mistress of her art; that she held ample powers in reserve, restrained herself, and was bent only on the reverent interpretation of the composition, one of Joachim Raff's. Of course when she had finished, she was enthusiastically applauded, and was not even allowed to leave the stage for a moment. She ran forward

obediently at the recall, laughed as she bowed, adjusted her instrument, then with an abrupt eerie note which announced strange things, she seemed to grasp a fresh faculty and sense in every auditor, and to bid them follow her into a charmed circle. She permitted her violin to play strange antics. Everybody gazed, rapt, surprised, under the spell, yet hardly knowing whether to be shocked or charmed, fascinated or repelled. There was a half uneasy feeling that the exhibition was something uncanny. But while every eye and ear was strained in expectation, the dissonant discords resolved one by one into a full melodious strain. Gradually from this emerged a melody, at first far off, then nearer, evidently approaching, and as it approached bringing a promise. Nothing could be sweeter than the higher registers of the instrument from which this melting, die-away air was beseechingly invoked. The little strain was heard again and again, growing fuller in strength. It seemed now to hover above and perpetually to descend, quivering restlessly on poised wings like a butterfly; it was like a beloved presence, felt, expected, ravishingly near, yet never quite clasped, — like a kiss always promised, but just eluded. It filled the yearning heart with rapture, the rapture which comes just before possession. Alas, the charming phantom was but playing hide-and-seek; half caught, it receded, vanished, then returned, this time as if it were actually to be grasped, only to flutter to a greater and greater distance. It was

gone, and a sad sighing lamentation was heard; one sharp, swift, twanging chord, and the little violinist bowed, laughed, and herself ran away from those she had enchanted.

In spite of his artistic enthusiasm over Fräulein Lemcke's clever playing, Breck had listened with a boding presentiment, his nerves strung to the highest tension. This was success, dazzling success. Impossible that lightning should strike twice in succession in the same place. He listened not only with his own senses, but with the ears of the girl whose turn was yet to come. Bettina was recalled again and again, as if the audience were insatiable if for only a glimpse of the pretty German maiden, who smiled and shyly kissed her hands, seeming always to deprecate the very emotion she had inspired. After such an overwhelming tribute it was impossible, Breck argued, that they should have any feeling left for Anita, who would instead be used as a *douche*, as it were, to allay the fever pitch of excitement which interfered with the progress of the concert. His fears were only too substantially confirmed. Tiring of the clamor, in the very midst of a fresh salvo of applause, the opposite door from that by which Bettina had for the time disappeared opened, and the accompanist, followed by Contarini, appeared, ushering forward a tall figure in a startlingly bright yellow gown, at the sight of whom all plaudits ceased on the instant. Breck felt ready to faint.

"Is not this the girl you wanted me to clap?" inquired Poorshaw, nudging his companion and recalling him to his senses.

"Yes," said Breck. "Come, let us show people she, too, has some friends in the audience."

The two began with no uncertain emphasis, but their volley gathered little force from others, and soon their own unaided endeavors seemed to rouse derisive echoes in the hall.

"We had better drop it," whispered Poorshaw with a suppressed chuckle; "see how everybody stares at us. They probably take us for paid claqueurs."

By this time Anita, led forward between Contarini and the accompanist, had reached the front of the stage. Breck suffered in every nerve as he looked at her. His tremors had been only too prophetic when the night before he had said to himself that he was not satisfied that she had chosen the right sort of gown. In the dull half-lights of the concert room, where the late afternoon sunlight struggled coldly to put out the gas, the yellow was too bright, the lace added a tawdry effect. Compared with the childish Fräulein, who in point of fact was four years her senior, Anita looked consummately adult, even middle-aged. She could not appear otherwise than handsome, but at this moment her beauty did not attract. Her large dark eyes traveled over the house, not timidly and trustfully like the German forget-me-nots, but almost defiantly. Had she pos-

sessed the requisite self-command to force herself to smile, she might still have charmed as she bowed; as it was, she bit her lower lip and looked sulky. Still, in very desperation, so Breck said to himself, the latent genius of the girl might assert itself as genius can assert itself, an irrestrainable natural force sweeping away impediments, in fact, organizing what seems like chaotic defeat into victory. He could read the expression of her face, and knew she realized that her moment of struggle had come, that she had to make her choice, and if she failed would be taken at her word.

Contarini, as he supposed, had chosen her songs wisely. What he had dreaded was that she should be carried away by excitement or enthusiasm. Lyrically, he could feel certain of her voice, but not dramatically. He was afraid, not of her showing herself tame and mediocre, but of being overambitious and striking a false note. He had thought only of her capabilities and limitations, not of the possibilities of the moment. Thus it was of little use for Breck to pray for a song in which her irrepressible idea might shape itself into a beautiful artistic novelty, for she had only Handel's sublime aria. She rendered it very faithfully and with some feeling, but the effect was amateurish, and it left the audience cold. They were still under the thrill of Bettina Lemcke's magic, and considered everything between her two appearances as a tedious *entr'acte* which must

be sat through patiently. They seemed not to take note of Anita save as the hackneyed cantatrice who fills up a gap in the programme. The faint applause which followed the song was a mere good-natured concession to an uninteresting artiste whose feelings nobody wished to hurt, and it so soon thinned and died away, and any attempt on the part of Breck and Poorshaw was so clearly perfunctory, they gave it up, feeling that the singer was more honored in the breach than the observance of the conventional encore.

"I shall go behind the scenes and speak to Miss Rivera," Breck remarked to his companion.

"Take me," said Geddes Poorshaw. "I admired her looks. I should like to see her close at hand."

And close at hand it must be confessed that Anita was far more charming than she had been at a distance. She was sitting with Mrs. Hugh Rivera in a small, cold room, well wrapped up in furs to avoid the draughts. Contarini was standing before her as the two young men entered, talking and gesticulating violently. Breck presented Poorshaw to the whole party, and hat in hand and with his best air the latter pressed his congratulations upon the songstress.

"Yaas, yaas," said Contarini striking in, "I say that it was all very well, very well indeed; and for the fairst time it is something to be very well, and not to be a fiasco utter and overwhelming. I say to Miss Rivera, 'Rome was not built in a

day.' You have the voice, you have the intellect, and you have the heart to sing; you have also the defects of these qualities. You have the nerves, you have the high and unattainable ideal, you have the doubt of yourself. They are as much to master as the voice, and only experience will conquer them. The one thing important to-day was not to fail, and you have not failed."

"What did you think?" asked Anita, looking eagerly at Breck.

"You sang admirably. I was horribly frightened, and my critical nerves were all on edge, yet I could not have asked you to sing better. As Contarini says, the great thing to achieve to-day was not to fail."

Miss Rivera shook her head. She had listened first to one and then to the other of the men who tried to comfort her, endeavoring to detect their real meaning behind their words.

"I don't feel it to be a success," she said, with a mutinous glance and smile which showed the possible flash of her eyes and her pretty teeth. "I am not happy over it. I know very well I did not conquer my public. As I stood there I felt humiliated. If you had not been close beside me, Mr. Contarini, I believe I should have turned and run away. And then to have to sing '*Lascia ch' io pianga*,' in which I have to weigh every note, as it were, and listen to the echo of my own voice. If I had only had the scena from '*Freischütz*' or even '*Liebestod*,' I might have put my whole soul

into my singing. Then when everybody was going wild over my voice, when they insisted on an encore, I would have said, 'Never again; you were cold to me, you gave me no welcome. Had you offered a kind word at the right time, I would have been your slave; as it is, never will I sing to you again!'"

"Softly, softly," said Contarini. "It will all come. Get familiar with the work you have to do. You are not yet an artist, you are my pupil. It is for me to judge, — for me, who recognize distinctions of style, method, timbre, unheard by the multitude. I wanted to feel sure what you could do with your voice. Now I understand. It is a beautiful talent; it will reward effort and self-renunciation with the very blossom of art. It is a voice that has its root in poetry, in feeling, in the great heart of sorrow, in the comprehension of the highest and the noblest, in what has made and will always make the great art of the world."

"It is all of no use. All the king's horses and all the king's men cannot reinstate me in my old self-belief," said Anita, with a little gesture and a dazzlingly saucy smile at one after another of the group of men before her. "The signor may talk, you may talk, Mr. Breck, but it was a failure, — at least, not a success. Now that German girl had what I call a success; she carried the people off their feet."

Anita's eyes happened to rest on Poorshaw as she spoke the last word.

"You sang charmingly," he remarked; "not that it matters whether a girl like yourself sings well or ill."

"I assure you it matters very much to me," said Anita.

"I do not see why you should take the trouble to do anything for a parcel of women who actually care nothing for music," Poorshaw went on with an air of indignation. "It is only that they like to pretend they are doing something."

"You do not seem to understand," cried Anita, with passion in her face and voice, "that music is my profession. The opinion of the public may not be worth caring about, but all the same I have got to live by it."

"I can't see that at all," retorted Poorshaw, with a look of ardent admiration.

"I mean I am obliged to earn my bread and butter," explained Anita, looking superb in her youthful scorn.

"Don't see it at all," Poorshaw insisted. "What I say is, if I were you I would not give myself the trouble."

"What do you mean? That I shall sit down helplessly and die of starvation?"

"Quite the reverse," said Poorshaw enigmatically.

Miss Rivera listened apparently without comprehension. It was time for her to gather up her energies for her second song, and Contarini told Breck to go back to the concert-room and take his

friend with him. Anita passed her next ordeal fairly well. When the concert was over, Poorshaw was disappointed to find that she had gone home at the conclusion of her song, attended by her sister and Signor Contarini. Breck was so much taken up with the reflection that the afternoon had settled his destiny for him that he walked away from the hall like a somnambulist, failing to observe the impression made upon Poorshaw, who talked of nothing but Miss Rivera, and expressed his admiration with an audacity which might have disarmed any but a jealous lover by its extraordinary *naïveté*.

"I don't know a girl in society who can compare with her for real good looks," he said.

"I dare say not," murmured Breck; "yet" —.

"She looked well on the stage," Poorshaw continued, "but a hundred times better off it. The notion of a girl like that talking of earning her own bread and butter with starvation as an alternative! The idea of her being exposed to the criticism of a lot of dull, insignificant people, not one of whom can hold a candle to her! Why, she has the most superb eyes, — never have I seen such eyes! They are so full of fire, and still at the same time they laugh, they challenge, they implore! It would be positively cruel" —

"We talk of the public being cruel," Breck burst in at this cue, pursuing the thread of his own thoughts; "but, after all, it is Art that is cruel, when it at once promises and deludes, gives

and denies. Art should not so easily surrender itself, — should reserve itself for a full gift, not offer slight favors to all who seek, here a little and there a little; to each an insufficient talent which serves merely to awaken longings never to be fulfilled, — takes away contentment and puts a thorn of ambition in its place, rankling into disenchantment, and finally into bitterness."

"I do not consider that it makes an atom of difference to a girl like Miss Rivera," said Poorshaw. "I always insist that art and books and music are simply intended for people out of the swim, or compensation for the poor and the old, the sick and the unhappy."

"There is more than a grain of truth in what you say," said Breck, and he laughed as he looked at the big, athletic fellow.

They were about to separate, when Poorshaw, with a sudden impulse of intimate affection, pressed Breck to dine with him at his club. Breck declined, having a clear idea of what was before him that evening.

"I wish you would give me to-morrow night then," said Poorshaw. "I don't see enough of you. Oh, by the way, I suppose there would be no harm in sending Miss Rivera some flowers? She might like the attention."

"Oh, it is not at all necessary," said Breck, with an air of surprise.

"It is the usual thing, quite the usual thing," said Poorshaw. "Where does she live?" He

wrote down the address, which Breck could not find a pretext to withhold, with an air of considering it a matter of high importance.

By eight o'clock Breck was again in the Riveras' little reception room. It was manifest that Anita's spirits had not risen. She told him that she and Maddy had been talking over the affair of the concert, and her manner made it manifest that they had touched the bottom of things, probed the actual vital meaning of what goes to make up success or failure. Mrs. Hugh Rivera was always a close observer, and to-day her eyes, quickened by jealous instinct, had taken in certain nice details on points which had hitherto been obscure and conjectural. She had not been dull in remarking every feature of Fräulein Lemcke's toilette. She had with jealous instinct seen the impresario surround the little violinist with an absolutely worshiping care, while he had neglected Anita. She was ready to concede that there had been a culpable ignorance of nice distinctions in the choice of the yellow satin gown, yet she had hitherto piqued herself on her knowledge of the fashions. It was her habit to read every item in the papers concerning them; she pored over fashion-plates and books of patterns, haunted the chief shops on opening days, never went by certain windows without a careful study of each figure displayed, and on Sundays it was actually a piously conceived and executed duty to walk up and down Fifth Avenue after morning service. She had

always declared that she considered it her *métier* to know what was worn, and she was now plunged into actual humiliation at having made a mistake in Anita's toilette. "Let me dress a woman, and I care not how she sings," had been her proud motto while engaged in the concoction of the yellow satin and lace gown, yet all the time she had failed to grasp the idea of the situation. The moment she saw Fräulein Lemcke's simple toilette, she had dreaded lest Anita's furbelows should estrange everybody's sympathies, and all that her worst fears could predict had come to pass.

"Now that it is too late, I see exactly what I should have done," said Anita, the moment Breck sat down opposite her. "Instead of wearing that dowdy, old-fashioned thing, I should have gone in hastily in a walking-dress, thrown down my muff, loosened my boa, and taken up my music as if I considered the occasion nothing in particular; then I might at least have had a chance of success from the start."

"You will know better what to do next time," said Breck.

"There will be no next time. This was a happy chance, and I have let it slip. Yesterday, Mr. Bayliss talked about the concert tour, — not a word of it to-day. And Contarini! In spite of all his consoling words, I know as well as if I had seen into his soul that the iron had entered there. And I do not wonder at his being disappointed. He has been so patient, — oh, so beautifully pa-

tient, — and what a reward I gave him! When I went out in the midst of the dying applause for the Lemcke, I felt cold, dull, disenchanted, and I showed in every tone and every look that I was dull, cold, and disenchanted. But how was I to be bright and hopeful? There I had been sitting in that uncomfortable place for an hour and a half, Contarini exhorting me, beseeching me, threatening me. Nobody else came near me; the Lemcke did not notice me by a word or a smile. Our two camps seemed utterly hostile. How could I do my best in cold blood? My wonder is that an artist can ever experience the necessary glow, the thrill, the emotion! Outside, the audience sit in a beautifully decorated auditorium, on softly cushioned seats, with warmth, light, and a cheerful buzz of voices. The artists are huddled shivering in a dingy little room, cold, draughty, the look of everything suggesting the seamy side. Not a comfortable chair is to be found; they have been made for the stage, gilded probably, but without a spring, and so slight in frame that you expect each moment they will give way beneath you. Everybody looks cross and anxious; everybody is finding fault. There is everything to depress one, and positively nothing to inspire; yet, in spite of this tedious interlude, in which one is torpid with chill and dread, one must come forth bold, sure, coquettish, conquering by sheer force of will, smiling as if one were happy, serene as if one were self-confident, proud as if one had

one's foot on the neck of the public, instead of being tremblingly dependent on its favor."

Breck, touched, even thrilled, leaned forward and seized the girl's hand with a look and manner so direct that Mrs. Rivera, sitting by, divined that he had forgotten he was not alone with Anita; accordingly, she discreetly went out, closing the door behind her.

"And to think," Anita went on, goaded always by the feeling that she had been the victim of imbecility and mischance, "that while I am suffering this humiliation and defeat Bettina Lemcke is exulting in her triumph. I can't help thinking how, to-night, she is surrounded by admirers, pressing forward to congratulate her. Engagements are being made for her in every city of the United States. In a few weeks she will be able to dictate terms, to demand what prices she likes. She must be out of her senses over her success, while I, — oh, it is cruel! — I have had so many defeats. I have never half told you, Mr. Breck, how much I have gone through. I wanted to write. I had the power to write, but nobody gave me the least encouragement. Then I began to paint, but although every one who saw my sketches was ready to confess that they had spirit and real aptitude, so many obstacles were put in my way that I lost all interest in my work. Whatever I set my heart upon fails me at the pinch of need. There seems to be a fatality pursuing me. And now, after all my beautiful dreams, to think that

because I was badly dressed and came in while the audience were under the spell of that little German girl, whom yesterday I was ready to look down upon" — She tore her hand away from Breck, and flung both her arms in air with a disconsolate gesture — "Oh, it is too much, — too much!"

Perhaps this flood of confessions might have been stemmed by a lover actuated by genuine passion, but the personal note, it must be confessed, jarred a little upon Breck.

"You speak as if everything had come to an end," he said reproachfully; "as if" —

"Everything is at an end," she returned forcibly.

"Just because" —

"I suppose I shall eat, I suppose I shall sleep," said Anita. "One has to go on living, and as one lives only by minutes, one mechanically answers the need of the moment. If I think of my future life in the aggregate I am frightened by it, — without hope, without ambition, without art."

"Art at least will last, and you can find some compensation in that."

"I shall feel about my music as I felt about my painting. For six months I could not look at my easel, my palette, or my color-box; it was like coming upon the corpse of a dead friend."

"Anita," cried Breck with sudden impetuosity, "I have been through all that. After I laid down palette and brush, it pierced me, — it pierced me

to the soul to see a picture; even to look at a landscape in nature, to see a fine sunset, the light shining through the branches of trees, brought my heart to my throat. Now I am wiser; at least I am more sane, less egoistic. I can understand that I pampered a little grief into a great one. Art has become all the more beautiful and worthy to me. I am glad that men free to follow art could go on doing, and doing better than I, the work I laid down. And just so some day you will come to realize that a benignant destiny had the ordering of all this. Life is many-sided, and you will take it up by some new handle. I laughed at Poorshaw this afternoon when he said that he saw no good in art except as a consolation for the old, the sick, and the unhappy; but there is something in it, after all."

"I was going to ask you who that Mr. Poorshaw was," said Anita with sudden interest.

"His name is Geddes Poorshaw. I designed a cottage for his mother last year. She was a widow, and she has since died, and the cottage now belongs to this young man. That is the way I became acquainted with him."

"He must be rich."

"I suppose he must be well off; how rich, I don't know."

"How happened he to be at the concert?"

"His sister, Mrs. Floyd, sent him in her place. She is interested in Fräulein Lemcke, who is to play at her house at a musicale."

"There it is again!" cried Anita, freshly stung by the recollection of the rival into whose lap all the gifts she herself coveted were being thrown. "I try not to hate that girl, but it does seem to me unjust that she should have everything and I nothing."

"She has worked longer than you and harder than you. I dare say she began when she was five years old. There are no miracles behind that admirable skill, but good solid, disinterested practice. She is a virtuoso used to her work, and you are not. You need a more thorough training, a surer technique. When you have mastered your voice to the point of knowing to a nicety just the effect you can produce with it, then you may let yourself go, and trust to the inspiration and the intuition which are the blossom of a perfect art."

"Let me have a little success, and I can work as faithfully as any one," said Anita. "I need the *élan* which good spirits bring."

Breck had a sense of fumbling, of wasting himself in generalities. Narrowness is essential to a lover.

"Musicians are unlucky," he remarked, "in the fact that the supreme test comes when the public is looking on. Now a painter may ultimately fail, but while he works he has the comfort of believing that he is putting the vital spark into his work."

"I assure you," said Anita, "that even if I failed to-day, I have often enough not failed.

I have had my fine moments. I have believed in my own power."

Breck now gathered up his strength for a home-thrust.

"I do not consider that you did fail," he said; "but I am ready to wish that you had failed absolutely."

She gazed at him with incredulity.

"Oh, you mean" —

"I mean," he said, leaning forward and speaking with an agitated face, but yet trying to carry off his emotion by a half laugh, "that what I want is not that you should be a great singer, but my wife."

She looked back at him as if in dismay, her dilated eyes seeming to read him through and through; then, as if compelled from the fire in his glance to believe in the truth of his words, she blushed and turned away.

He laid his hand on hers. "Will you marry me, Anita?" he asked.

She smiled mischievously, then, with her face still half averted, looked back at him out of the corners of her eyes.

"Why should you wish to marry me?" she asked, as if still incredulous.

"I long to spare you, to serve you, to watch over you."

"Oh, I see. Out of pity."

"Out of pity!" he repeated. "What nonsense, — what absurdity!"

"How am I to know that you really love me?" she murmured.

Breck blushed deeply; for a moment he felt conscience-stricken. Then, as if eager to mask the whole with the fragment of truth which really existed, he hastened to say, "Have I not been coming to see you for months? I told a friend of mine yesterday that you were the only woman I had ever thought of asking to be my wife."

"Who was that, — Mr. Poorshaw?" she inquired.

"No; Holly Ruff." They had both risen, and he went up to her and tried to take her hand. "Why do you evade me? Why do you not believe in me?" he exclaimed reproachfully.

She retreated a few steps, then with a saucy, half-mischievous smile on her face, which was glowing with color, said, "I did not expect to marry anybody. I do not want to marry anybody yet, — not until I have made a great success in some way."

"That is a very false notion of life, which you had much better correct," he said, taking a step towards her.

She held him off, as it were, by an imperative gesture.

"But it is not a simple matter to marry," she went on. "I am not an easily satisfied person. I should be dreadfully unhappy, unless in some way I made something brilliant out of my life. I should not like to marry tamely, like others, to

settle down in a humdrum fashion." She gave him a laughing glance. "I should at least insist on being loved madly."

He had felt himself dull and cold, but this bribe to his ardor put fire into his veins. Up to this moment the phrases he knew he ought to be uttering in such a crisis whirled confusedly in his head, but his tongue was stubborn. At her challenge, however, he was beside her, his arm was about her, his lips pressed to hers.

"You infant, you goose!" he whispered. "Is a man to sum up everything in a sentence? Much you know about the way I can love you! Do you call me tame? Do you dare assert that life with me will be a humdrum affair?"

He held her away from him, a hand on each shoulder, and both laughing; they looked each into the other's eyes.

"I also object very decidedly to marrying anybody who is poor," she retorted, her whole face dimpling with fun and sweetness. "I have told Maddy a hundred times that nothing would induce me to live in a crowded little flat like this, up five flights of stairs."

"You will live exactly where I think best," said Breck. "Perhaps in one room, where you will contentedly grill my chop and make my cup of coffee."

"Never will I live in one room. Never will I make your coffee or grill your chop," said Anita; yet the expression of her face belied her words.

"Not only will you do it, but you will exult in it," Breck insisted, drawing her nearer to him. "I think I see you darning my stockings, putting buttons on" —

"Never, never, never! I assure you I was not born to be any man's slave."

"You have thus far mistaken your vocation," said Breck. "Up to the present time you have run after false ideas. I will give you a new heaven and a new earth. You must burn the gods you used to worship, and worship the gods you used to burn." He held her face close to his and looked into it, his own tremulous with feeling. "Anita," he whispered, "confess that you love me a little. Say you will marry me." She made an effort to escape, then, as if she relented, met his eyes, smiled, and permitted him to kiss her.

"Now that is settled," he said. "You will be my wife."

As if this brought her to her senses she tore herself away from him.

"No, no, no," she said with new energy. "I do not promise yet. I ought not to give myself away on an impulse. It is my whole life, — my whole life."

"It is in return for mine," said Breck seriously and proudly. "Do I offer you nothing?"

"It is different with a man. He still goes on in his career; he actually resigns nothing, while a woman" — But she softened, and took a step nearer him. "I can't help loving you a little,"

she said, with a tremulous laugh. "I do not see how any woman could. No, no, I do not want to be swept off my feet, as it were. Give me a little time to reflect. I cannot at this moment promise irrevocably."

But although she persisted in this reserve, and said that she must have time to reflect, he laughed at such scruples. Certainly she had told him she loved him, could not help loving him. She had kissed him. He had wished to anchor himself, and now he was safely anchored.

VIII.

MRS. LEE CHILDE had but one near relation, her mother's brother, Dr. George Pardee, who was the co-heir of the great property, and indeed had for many years superintended the manufacture of the famous Elixir, which engaged a whole village of work-people in New Hampshire.

Early in January Dr. Pardee came to New York to see his niece, stopping at the Everett House, and spending his mornings with her. His object was to consult Milly on the feasibility of disposing of the business, for which he had received a good offer. He was growing older and was far from strong. He had no heir except Milly, who was glad to consent to the sale, having at times asked herself, with dismay, what in the case of her uncle George's death she should do with the Elixir. The negotiations filled two mornings, then on the third, the last of Dr. Pardee's stay in New York, he had a word to say on other matters.

"And how is it with you, Emily?" he asked. He was a tall, thin man, his face and manner austere, yet expressive at times of peculiar sweetness, and his large gray eyes full of expression.

The two were sitting in Milly's morning room, which was delicately, but not luxuriously furnished. She was at her desk, and at this question wheeled her chair round and looked into her uncle's face.

"What are you doing with your life?" he proceeded.

"Not much," she returned. "I decided to stay in New York and try going into society once more. After all, papa is getting old; he needs a companion."

"I see that you are here," said Dr. Pardee. "I asked what you were doing."

"I entertain frequently. Papa likes to have people coming and going. Besides, I go out a great deal just now."

"Is that all you do?"

"I am on several committees," said Milly. "I am patroness of all sorts of enterprises. Everybody knows that I am willing to give to any worthy philanthropic scheme. Indeed, Mr. Venn would tell you that I give far too much. But, with my income to dispose of, what could I conscientiously do except give? If you saw the entreating letters I have every day! But I dare say you receive twice as many."

"I know, I know," said Dr. Pardee. "I hope you don't flatter yourself that you are gaining heaven by giving of your superfluity to rich or poor."

"No." She looked at her uncle.

"Emily," said he, with a faint smile, "has your money ever brought you happiness? Has it ever bought what you wanted?"

She shook her head. "One cannot buy happiness," she said with some uneasiness. "Why do you ask such a question?"

"I dare say you have probably found as I do," he proceeded, with a little nod, "that your money hinders your chance of happiness rather than adds to it. It is easier, I tell you, Emily, for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. I am sixty-three years old. I have not long to live, all the doctors tell me. I cannot now begin and live my life over again, but if I had the chance I would give away all I possess and struggle along shoulder to shoulder with struggling men."

She looked at him with bright-eyed surprise.

"I say that it is more easy for a camel to pass through the needle's eye than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven," he went on; "but by heaven I mean the happiness of this world, for which we all experience an infinite longing. I have never been happy. For a time I deceived myself with sanguine illusions. At college I flattered myself for a year I was a favorite, then discovered I was the jest of the class. They called me 'Money-bags' and 'Bottles.' Still, I believed I had one friend. In vacations I took him to my father's, or to Europe, or to the Rockies. I loved him. I trusted him to the core. Well, one day I overheard him talking about his 'money-bag,' and remarking that he took the goods the gods provided, and never shook his bottle to get at the dregs. After that I was very lonely at college. I had not been sent for the sake of study, and nobody seemed to consider it worth while to help

me to study. It was taken for granted that with all the Pardee money I was indifferent to books. Not until years later did I compreLend how I had thrown away, or rather been encouraged to throw away, my best chance of happiness. My father wished me to take a degree in medicine in order, like himself, to be Dr. Pardee. I hated the profession, shirked all I could, and the moment I had my diploma I dropped all pertaining to it. You see, Emily, not having my own livelihood to make, my faculties were never gauged, my ideas never sharpened, my wits never stirred. The excitement, the competition, the charm of life, was reserved for those who had something to compete for. I married very early, — that was another mistake. I was married for my money, and my money and what it bought perfectly satisfied my wife. She died in a few years, and her child died. That was a sorrow I have never got over, but I have never run the risk of making another mistake. Little by little I found out what was in me. A man must do his business in the world, and gradually I found it worth while to live without disorder in my affairs, and help others to avoid disorder. Very likely in some ways I have even done good. In a material way the village seems to be prospering. Every year I give large amounts to all sorts of charities, — in some instances, I confess, with the feeling that my money goes to support institutions and people I am not in sympathy with."

Milly, listening, experienced a dismay she could

not trace to any adequate cause. "You have enjoyed travel," she murmured; "you are an indefatigable reader of all sorts of books."

"I have traveled everywhere, and with interest and curiosity; and I have read with interest and curiosity, but never with any consciousness of actually belonging to the real world of work, of ideas, of achievements, of keen sympathies applied to what is essential and vital in existence. I take it, a man only gets what he has earned in life; now I have earned nothing. I sometimes say, 'There are two ways of getting money, earning and stealing; and certainly I have earned no penny. Thus, I suffer from the conviction that nothing honestly belongs to me, that I owe it all. Only how to pay my debt!"

Milly had stared at her uncle, growing all the time paler. Now when he paused she started up and crossed the room, her chin raised and her two hands clasping her throat.

"I am afraid you have become morbid," she said, standing at a distance and looking at him. "You ought to have said to yourself, 'There is happiness in the world, and I will be happy.'"

The flicker of a smile crossed his face. "You have said that to yourself," he observed.

"Yes. Why should I not be happy, uncle George?"

"You just told me you had not been happy."

"I am still young, only twenty-seven. Surely, at my age, one can afford to have made a mistake or two and still have time to be happy."

"I never felt quite sure," said Dr. Pardee, "whether your marriage was or was not an absolute mistake, Emily."

"If I were to begin over again," said Milly earnestly, "I doubt if I should alter it. It was, after all, an experience. I might have made a commonplace marriage and have had a commonplace happiness; but I married Lee Childe, that is, his mother made him marry me, for the sake of my money."

"It runs in the blood, or with the Pardee money."

"But I was in love with Lee, that is, as a very young girl is in love," said Milly. "He was very handsome, very elegant, and had a way of uttering little rankling flatteries and smiling down at me. One day he told me I must marry him, and it was exactly as if heaven had opened. You see, uncle George, I have had my little romance, after all. We were married very soon after the engagement was made. I soon found out that he regarded me as a crude, ill-formed girl, whom he trusted to his mother to be trained into something presentable. Uncle George, I could not begin to tell you what I went through, the first year of my marriage. I felt he did not love me, was contemptuous of me. My feelings were wound up to a pitch of acute agony by my continual strife with myself. I seemed to be the sport of awkward accident, of imbecility, of ill-luck. I made mistakes over which my cheeks still burn when I recall them.

I knew that I was a laughing-stock, that Lee hated to go out with me lest I should commit some *bêtise*, that I continually jarred upon him like a false note in music. However, I grew older every day, and was not so dull that I could not improve. Mrs. Childe died, and Lee soon became miserably ill. If he could have trusted me to nurse him it would have been a sort of happiness; but no, he had a man, Teddo, who knew exactly how to please him. I could do nothing except sit with folded hands."

"That is another penalty of being rich. It separates you from those you love; hired service is more skillful," said Dr. Pardee.

"For months and months after he died," Milly went on with shining eyes, "I was the unhappiest creature in the world. If I could have had one frank, loving pressure of the hand to remember, I should not have been plunged into such utter chaos. It was papa who finally gave me comfort. He told me that Lee had once said to him, 'Milly is the sweetest woman in the world. It has never crossed her mind that we have all lived on her money. I should like to have her understand that I have appreciated her; that if I have seemed cold and ungrateful it is because I have been a sick man, and that a sick man has to seem a heartless man because he has no strength to spend on emotion.' Uncle George, if I have said that once to myself, I have said it ten thousand times. I have pressed it to my heart as a Catholic presses a crucifix."

"A poor reward. He was a selfish man."

"It was his training. His mother had brought him up to feel that the world existed for him. After I knew that after all he had had a regard for me, the sting went out of my grief. It became an appreciable fact, — partly perhaps from understanding papa, — that there was a sort of cynicism in the blood, — that for generations the family had lived so far from deep emotions they abhorred the idea of strong feeling. Perhaps, as you say, they had been too rich, and had lost the kingdom of heaven."

"Now you have got over your grief for your husband?"

She flushed slightly. "It is almost five years since he died," she faltered, as if deprecating his words. "The pang of it is gone. It all seems long ago. I did all he would let me do, but of course he never really cared for me."

"No doubt you have offers. I wonder if you will marry again."

"If I ever do marry," said Milly eagerly, "it will be because" — The impulse carried her so far, then she blushed and broke off.

"Because you are in love?"

"That is only a part of it. Indeed, I mistrust myself. I have always been so hungry for somebody to love, somebody to spend myself for." She laughed as she spoke; she had regained her self-command.

"You want a man to be ardently in love with

you," said Dr. Pardee with conviction. "It will not be easy to prove his disinterestedness. Easy enough to love a pretty woman with your income."

"I shall know," said Milly. "I have been married once for my money. I have had the experience."

"I warn you to beware of expecting miracles. The safest thing to do is to marry a man of equal means, who asks nothing from you."

"You do not seem to think I care about being happy," said Milly, with a little soft petulance. "Unless I were sure of being happy I should never think of marrying at all."

"Emily," said Dr. Pardee, taking her hand and drawing her towards him, "there is somebody."

She laughed, blushed, but did not deny it.

"I warn you," said he, "that it is more easy for a camel to pass through a needle's eye than for a rich woman to enter the kingdom of heaven."

He took his leave; and after he had gone, Milly reflected upon all he had said, his premonition of his own end, his careful arrangements for herself. The intimations he had given of his own life, thwarted and defeated in its personal hopes, weighed upon her. She could combat his views, yet there was a voice, and a persuasive voice, in this solemn reiteration of the text of his sermon to her; still, she knew that there was a

fallacy in all he had uttered, for she was going to be happy.

"It was all chance," she said to herself. She had seen Sidney Breck, and everything had altered in values. So far, she had contented herself with planning Breck's future, — a future in which she had no visible place. At times she dreamed of his turning back to his beloved art, and of her telling him to devote all his powers to becoming a painter. Again, it seemed to her that, with his strongly diversified tastes, he ought to become a real connoisseur and make a great collection of pictures. Always, when she planned and plotted, her joy was in giving, — in giving on her knees. He had touched her; she liked him. The farthest she had gone in her deepest soul had been once to say to herself, "He loves me!" That had happened on an occasion when she had asked him to meet her at X——'s art rooms and give her his views on a picture of Daubigny's which she thought of buying. It was a day of furious wind and rain, and when she left her carriage the man who held the umbrella over her had splashed her long cloak with mud. She was indifferent, but Breck, advancing to the door to meet her as she entered, gave a cry as if some calamity had overtaken him.

"There is mud on your gown," he said.

"Yes," she returned cheerfully; "I have as many spots as Lady Macbeth."

Already he was on his knees, scouring away at

the stains, and would not desist until all signs of the desecration were rubbed away.

"There," he said in a tone of satisfaction, and smiled at her.

It was then she had said to herself, "He loves me!" — a woman's test, a woman's subtle intuition. It gave her unspeakable content; yet she had never said in return, "I love him!" It was only that she liked him. She enjoyed his talk, not that she considered him especially clever, but that he seemed to her fresh and real, that he gave frankly the actual outcome of his mind and heart. She was never tired of watching his face, and was charmed by an expression she found there at times, like that of a delightful little boy half-astonished at things. It would be something to live for, to set him free to follow his own bent, to give all his powers and faculties free play.

By this time a full fortnight had passed since Breck had dined with her the evening before the ball, and she had not seen him. He had perhaps been out of town; he had once spoken of going to Washington. After a week she had sent him this little note: —

DEAR MR. BRECK, — Where are my plans? Am I, after all, to have no *château en Espagne?*

Yours, MILLY CHILDE.

To which he replied: —

DEAR MRS. CHILDE, — It was all in the air.

I am making it over on new foundations, and will bring it soon. Respectfully yours,

SIDNEY BRECK.

Still he did not come, and by the end of this blank fortnight she began to grow restless. She recalled every incident of the little dinner party to which he had found himself unexpectedly invited. At the time she had told him to come that Monday evening, she had forgotten the engagement. When it was recalled to her mind, she had half decided to send a line explaining that Mrs. Fletcher, Miss Hurst, and Mr. Norreys were coming to dinner, and afterwards they all had to go on to the first ball of the season. Now she was ready to confess to the foolish feminine vanity which had kept her from warning him he was not to be the only guest. She had hoped he would consider it a piquant surprise to come upon her in that splendid gown. Instead of being charmed, he had perhaps been wounded. She could remember that he had scarcely looked at her, and that when she did once or twice meet his eyes they wore a dazzled expression. Yet how well he had talked! What spirits he had been in! With what fun and good humor he had rallied Whiley Norreys! At the time she had felt grateful to him for the self-restraint which made him talk to every one rather than to herself. Now she began to readjust her impressions according to the new light thrown by his long silence and absence.

She could not believe that he had been affronted, but in some way his pride had been hurt. He was diffident and modest, and perhaps that very gown she had longed to have him admire, with its cloth of silver and its girdle and clasps of jewels, had separated them.

The new year had passed in this interval, and she had sent him a present; then, when no answer came, she finally dispatched this note: —

DEAR MR. BRECK, — Will you dine quietly with papa and myself, — nobody else, — at seven to-night. Please send word, "yes" or "no," by messenger. MILLY CHILDE.

The one word "Yes" came, and Milly's spirits rose.

"Papa," she said, "Mr. Breck is coming to dinner."

"I thought you were dining out."

"I had three engagements for to-night, but I have thrown them all over. I cannot please everybody and Milly Childe into the bargain, so I decided for once to please Milly Childe."

"Depend upon it," said Mr. Childe with an air of having reached the ultimate secret of things, "that is the safest way. If you please yourself, somebody at any rate is certain to be pleased. My wife used to proclaim the fact that she only lived for others, — never seemed to have reflected how superfluous the effort was."

"Papa," said Milly, "I wonder you never thought of marrying again."

He gazed at her blankly.

"Now, do you actually suppose I am that sort of person?"

"But, why not? There is somebody you are always dying to see, and who is always rejoiced to see you; to whom you talk endlessly, yet have to leave off with the half unsaid; who invariably puts you in good spirits; with whom you enjoy, so to speak, the whole of yourself, not a mere fraction."

"Good heavens!" said Mr. Childe, with an air as if at his wits' end, "I can't think what you are driving at. Whom do you mean?"

"Whom do I mean? Why, cousin Agnes Fletcher, of course."

"Agnes Fletcher! Why, yes; I see." Mr. Childe had started up in his perplexity, but now, as the air of shock and alarm passed off his face, he sat down, and his delicately chiseled features relaxed into a peculiarly genial expression. "Agnes Fletcher! why, of course," he murmured and smiled, — a gradually broadening smile, — while he told off the points of Milly's riddle on his fingers: "Somebody I am always dying to see; who is always dying to see me; somebody I am never tired of talking to; who puts me in good spirits. No doubt, Milly, that is all true; but" —

"We all know what such affinities lead to,"

interrupted Milly saucily. "As I said before, papa, why don't you" —

He shook his head with an air of sudden depression.

"My personal experience of matrimony does not exactly harmonize with your hypothesis," he said mournfully. "It sounds all right, — somebody who is always dying to see me, never tired of listening to me, puts me in good humor. But I have been married once, and that description does not seem to fit my first wife at all."

"They say, you know, that a second marriage is the triumph of hope over experience," suggested Milly.

"Do they, though?" said Mr. Childe, brightening. "That is neat, remarkably neat, — 'the triumph of hope over experience.' It seems to me I never heard an epigrammatic saying which was so absolutely veracious. 'The triumph of hope over experience!' It is really astonishing how clever some people are." He chuckled. It was evident to Milly that the pebble she had thrown had not sunk into the deep ocean without raising ever-widening circles of ripples. "You don't consider me too old?" he asked after a time, in a stiff, reluctant tone.

"No, indeed; and I am sure cousin Agnes does not."

"She is not so very much younger herself," he observed, and added, "Certainly, at her age she can have no great expectations."

Milly trod on air that day. She liked to feel that she could shape events and alter people's destinies to their advantage. This feeling of elation had not left her when Sidney Breck entered at seven o'clock.

"You have been ill," she said, the moment she glanced at him.

"Not quite well. They tell me I have been working too hard, but I fancy it all came from a slight cold," he replied.

His face had given her a feeling of alarm. He seemed wholly to have lost his habitual glow of youthful color: the orbits of his eyes looked larger. Even Mr. Childe, who was still in the clutches of a new and absorbing idea, was struck by the startling delicacy of the young face.

"Better look out," he observed; "I have no doubt it all comes from these infernally overheated modern houses. Half the young men in New York die of pneumonia."

At table Breck spoke little, but smiled as Milly and her father-in-law talked, turning his face first towards one and then towards the other, as if deeply interested. Yet, although he seemed thus to listen, Milly felt as if actually he was not listening, but was preoccupied and mentally far beyond reach of the subjects discussed. She did not recognize the expression in his face. Hitherto, he had looked at her with a sort of eager humility; she had seemed to read in his eyes, "Do what you will with me. I love to do your bid-

ding." The same self-surrender was not in his eyes to-night, nor did any glow come into his face as he spoke to her. He maintained a simple, serious demeanor which suggested a poise of mind which no trivial force could alter. She was jealous of this new strength of dignity. Twice, when the butler put some question as to his choice of wines, Breck seemed impatient, waved his hand, and looked absolutely haughty and unapproachable; but never before had he seemed to Milly so admirable. She was radiant with joy at seeing him once more; she talked incessantly, and if her words brought the faintest smile to his lips she was triumphant. As she left the two men at table she smiled and nodded at Breck, who rose ceremoniously and followed her to the door, without speaking. When he came back to the table he seemed to feel the absence of some stimulant; he leaned his head against the high back of the chair, closed his eyes, and once or twice passed his hand over his forehead as if to press away some importunate thought.

"Do take some Madeira," said Mr. Childe, after waiting for a few moments.

"No, thanks."

"Have a cigar, at least."

"Not to-night."

"Then perhaps you had rather go and find Mrs. Childe."

"I have something to show her," said Breck, rising. "If you will excuse me I will go into the parlor."

"That fellow seems to be talking in his sleep. If he had drunk anything I should decide it had gone to his head. Perhaps it is Milly instead," said Mr. Childe to himself, left alone and preparing to take a little nap.

Breck found Milly standing before the fire in the rear drawing-room. As she heard his step she turned; there was a tremulous expression on her face.

"So you left papa to smoke his cigar alone," she said, almost with timidity.

"I wished to speak to you."

"About the plans?"

"About the plans, but also" — He paused, and as she met his glance her heart began to beat violently.

"I have not yet thanked you for the etchings you sent," he said.

"Did you like them?" she asked eagerly. "I remembered what you said about the rarity of good architectural etchings, and these seemed to me excellent."

"Admirable, yes, but" —

"But what?" They stood looking at each other as if defiant.

"I do not feel justified in accepting them," he said, dropping his words as if they came by a painful effort. "I happen to know the cost of such things" —

"The cost of such things?" she broke in. "What does it matter? I liked the etchings, — I

thought you might like them. I ventured to hope they might even be serviceable to you. Yet you talk about cost. Oh, Mr. Breck!"

He did not answer, but something in his look and attitude suggestive of pride and reluctance seemed more and more to excite her. Her eyes dilated as they searched his face. Her hands clasped and unclasped.

"I thought we were friends," she cried.

Her tone smote him. "Oh, Mrs. Childe!" he said with a deprecatory gesture.

"And if we are friends," she went on almost passionately, "what does it matter? I happen to be rich, so rich that the cost of things scarcely counts if I wish to buy them. Now if I happened to be poor and it were you who were rich, Mr. Breck, how pleasant it would be to have you give me presents."

"But I am not rich," said Breck, not altering his simple, serious manner; "and it is not I who have it in my power to give. And since I cannot give I cannot bring myself to receive."

She gazed at him in astonishment.

"I have offended you," she exclaimed. "I know not how, — perhaps it may be best not even to ask what I have done, simply to beg you to forgive me. Believe me, Mr. Breck, nothing could be further from my wish than to displease you in any way."

She said this breathlessly; he could see tears in her eyes.

"How could you offend me?" he muttered. He half turned away as if the ordeal was too severe. "Oh, Mrs. Childe," he said, his voice trembling, "I ought not to be here. I ought never to have come."

"Yes, I have offended you," she went on as if he had not spoken. "I cannot but think something happened the night you dined here with those people. You see, Mr. Breck, when I spoke to you about coming I forgot the engagement. It was all so little to me. Perhaps finding me surrounded and occupied you said to yourself that I was capricious. But I am not capricious."

"No, I do not think you are capricious," he replied; but he had turned away, and she could not see his face.

"What is it then?"

"It is," he burst out almost fiercely, "that our paths are wide apart. You have no need of me, and I have no right to intrude upon you. You called me your friend, but how can a man in my position be your friend?"

For a few moments she had felt troubled, almost overwhelmed; now she experienced an exquisite sense of relief.

"How can a man in your position be my friend?" she repeated very softly. "I might affect to misunderstand you. I might say that you probably considered yourself too clever and too usefully employed to waste time on a frivolous woman like myself. But that is not what you meant. There

is, instead, some idea in your mind that as a rich woman I enjoy some especial prerogatives. But tell me who are to be my friends? Those whom I enjoy, delight in, whose words I repeat over and over to myself, whose visits I look forward to, who give charm and stimulus to all they share with me, or the idle people I meet? Do you consider me so dull that I prefer those who do nothing, who can do nothing? Society is interesting, I suppose, to those ambitious to get on in it, to those born in it, but if you think I care for society you have no idea of the woman I am. I love the thought, the ideas, of the real world. I love nature, I love art, and these people who live on the surface of things simply cramp and weary me. With you it has been so different, Mr. Breck, for with you I am myself. You have powers, and you know how to use them; you are honest, you are filled with love for the best things in the world. Am I saying too much? But I feel as if I had to defend myself against some accusation. I suspect that somebody has been telling you evil things of me, — perhaps that I am a coquette. I am not a coquette, — at least, if I am ever a coquette it is only in self-defense. I am not, — I shall never be a coquette with you. I want you to understand that."

Her voice failed her. He was impelled to turn, although he had not looked at her as she poured out this tumultuous rush of words. She was flushed, — all her features were quivering.

"Oh, Mrs. Childe," he began in a tone of despair, but she regained her voice and swept on in her defense.

"I spoke to you once of my uncle. He was here last week, and one day he was telling me about his spoiled life. He declared that his wealth had given him no happiness, that it had simply robbed him of his chance to use his faculties and work for the objects in life he craves. He said he had had no comrades, no true friends; that his wife had married him without love, simply desiring his money; that in every direction, turn where he might, his wealth had stood between him and the actual world-wide, world-deep life which poorer men taste the pang and the joy of. He warned me that it would be my fate, as well, to find no disinterested friendship, no disinterested love, no work I could put my hand to and perform with all my heart and soul. Again and again he reiterated that it was more easy for a camel to pass through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. I was ready then to laugh at his cruel prophecy. To-night I begin to feel the force of it, to be stifled by it."

He caught her hands. Great tears were rolling down her cheeks. Her face was irresistibly moving to him. For a moment they looked at each other in silence, then bending down he kissed first one palm of hers, then the other, and dropped his hold upon her.

"I must tell you something," he said in a husky

voice, — "something that has happened to me in these three weeks."

She shuddered and drew back.

"I am engaged, — engaged to be married," he went on in a tone hardly above a whisper. His glance had dropped to the floor, but he was conscious that she had moved away and had thrown herself into a chair at some distance. "It was sudden," he went on, "but after all, it had been in my mind since I first met her." He stopped a moment and tried to steady his voice, then resumed. "All at once I felt as if she needed to be shielded, and I could shield her. I — I" —

His voice died away, the silence tortured him, and his self-contempt grew. A restless devil within him had urged to save himself, and he had flung this insult in the face of the woman who had permitted him to penetrate her inmost thoughts. But then it was the only alternative which could save him from falling at her feet, pressing his lips to her raiment, telling her that he had worshiped her from the first moment he met her, — must always worship her. His only safety lay in blurting out the truth to her, just as for three weeks he had kept himself in the grooves by saying day by day and hour by hour, "I am engaged," always with the same recurring amazement that he had made utter havoc with the precious things of life, and had thrown away all he cared for.

The silence must be ended, and he must somehow get away from this house, which he ought not

to have entered. He finally raised his head, which he had kept bowed in dreary, hopeless self-abasement. Milly had sunk into a chair; both arms had fallen forward on the table, and her head was bent on them. He uttered a groan, and advanced towards her. At the sound she raised her head, and by an effort sat back in her chair and crossed her hands on her lap. Once she opened her lips to speak, but she could not utter a syllable.

He was standing before her with a pale, drawn face.

"I wish — I wish I could venture — " he faltered.

A burning blush rose to her temples. "Do not say anything. I implore you to say nothing," she murmured almost inaudibly.

"Shall I go away?" he asked.

"Please do," she said, with timid sweetness, and half smiling. "That will be best."

He went out at once. After he had gone Milly sat down cowering over the fire as if shaken by a chill. Mr. Childe entered, looked about, and asked with surprise, —

"What! That young fellow gone?"

"Yes," answered Milly.

"What was the matter with him? Was he ill?"

"He said he was overworked. I dare say he had an engagement."

Mr. Childe sank into his favorite chair.

"Milly," said he, "you have put an idea into my head."

She glanced at him affectionately and laughed, but said nothing. The tea-table was brought, and Mr. Childe drank the cup of tea his daughter-in-law made him, all the time ringing the changes upon the new idea, which was evidently a stimulating one, with far-reaching suggestions. He had reinforced his dwindling courage by the recollection of the dash and ease with which he had made love in former days, and she humored him by not only listening to his reminiscences, but with quick sympathy guiding him over the possible difficulties and dangers his fancy occasionally presented. She was astonished to find herself talking naturally, with an easy command of words. Once she offered to read aloud, but Mr. Childe was too much interested in the next chapter of his own history to care for the history of less interesting people. At eleven o'clock the butler entered, offering each a glass of water, and seemed to suggest by his movements that the evening was over. Milly longed to stay below, but knew that Wilkins would not go to bed until he had attended to fire and lights. She offered her cheek to Mr. Childe, who for once gave her a hearty caress, then went upstairs to her own room. She had dreaded coming here; in this room she had lived through many a struggle, and she knew that the hardest struggle of all was before her.

She summarily dismissed her maid, and sat down before the fire until the door was shut upon the woman, when, rising, she bolted herself in, and

going to the glass gazed upon the reflection she found there.

"I have betrayed myself," she said audibly. "Since the beginning of the world no woman has so shamelessly betrayed herself." She turned away and paced up and down the room a few times; then, with a motion and look as if experiencing physical torture, she flung herself face downwards on the lounge, and for a long time remained motionless. She did not weep: a lethargy seemed to have seized her emotional faculties. What she suffered from was a weary, intolerable sense of the irony of fate. All the evening she had upheld herself by a resolution to leave New York on the morrow. The town would be unbearable. She could never see Sidney Breck again. She remembered his expression, at first haughty and resolute, then touched and frightened. . . . A man in love with another woman, — engaged to marry another woman, yet compelled to listen to such a confession as had been poured out to him that night. Milly stifled a cry as the shame of her defeat rankled anew.

"Why should I not be candid? Why should I not try to be simple and human and womanly?" That was the sophistical plea which her heart had put forward when he had confronted her with that stubborn resistance.

She saw herself in a new light. She had always said that she cared nothing for her wealth, did not rate its advantage at a pin's fee. Yet as if she

had been the most unblushingly sordid of women, she had counted with assurance upon buying the young architect's services, his friendship, his love, perhaps. All the time his ideal had been something quite the opposite of hers. He wanted a wife whom he could protect, comfort, sustain. He had said it: "She needed to be shielded, and I could shield her."

Again Milly felt the scorching ignominy of the inarticulate burning shame which had consumed her when Breck uttered these words.

"And yet he had sometimes seemed to care about me," she whispered, clutching at some self-justification. Then, hopeless, she cried aloud with clear conviction, "No! nobody has ever loved me! Nobody ever will love me!" Even her mother's tenderness had been masked by her anxieties; she had dreaded lest her daughter should count too assuredly on the happiness of this world and depend too little on what descends from above.

It was three o'clock before Milly, all at once realizing that the fire was low and the room cold, started up. Going to the dressing-table she turned up the lights and again looked at herself. She was pale to haggardness, and heavy lines showed under her eyes and about her mouth.

"I never was pretty," she reflected, "and now I am old and shall constantly grow older. He will marry a young girl; I dare say that she is a very young girl, who is beautiful to-day, and will be

more beautiful to-morrow, and years and years hence more beautiful still."

The thought of that happy young girl, beloved and shielded, pierced her anew. Tears rolled down her cheeks, but she conquered herself. "I am glad to have him happy," she said, as if suddenly seizing upon a new hope. "I will not be a poor creature. I am glad to have him happy."

She went to bed and slept. Again and again, when she restlessly turned and awoke with a feeling of calamity, she resolutely said this to herself, and once more slept. The intention not to give way was strong upon her when she awoke.

IX.

Even if she ran away from New York, she said to herself next day, whither could she go that this spectre would not pursue her? She had lived of late with all the possibilities of her nature in sight. There had been an incessant thrill of some joyful, indefinable feeling, a sense of something unexpected about to happen. The least event had given a stir to her pulse; by turns she had been hot and cold; a chance encounter had set her blood tingling; a reverse had frozen her heart like a lump of ice. Existence had been a desperate but a delightful effort, and these extremes and alternations could be borne because they showed her far-off vistas and reaches into regions hitherto unexplored. It was something at least to have been set free, — to have at last believed in happiness. She must pay the price without flinching and without tears.

She was determined to look at the facts of life by the clear light of day. Every one called her an exceptionally fortunate woman; what she considered her limitations were, according to her friends and advisers, the result of her magnificently expanded opportunities. More than once when she had personally attempted some philanthropic effort, she had drawn back with a quick perception that she simply impeded the efforts of others who

had better training and tact for the work. "*Your* province is to give, — to give nobly and at the right moment," she was invariably told with unmistakable emphasis. Other women vaunted their engrossing occupation which never left them a spare moment. How could she fill her own days? If she were to go on living it was indispensable that she should make interests for herself which offered color, variety, excitement. No use to try to do good to the poor and the unhappy by her presence; her cheques were more welcome. What she must do, then, was to throw this sop to Cerberus, and then endeavor to seize the patent advantages of her own every-day life. Hitherto she had looked at the world from starry heights; perhaps this defeat had humanized her: she was at least tired of herself, and was disposed to lay aside her fastidiousness. She would try to content herself with her own little world, accept what was nearest, and endeavor to find diversion, as other people do, in whatever presents itself, good, bad, or indifferent. There are people who for health's sake and against natural inclination have been ordered to drink strong liquors, and have ended by being enslaved by the habit; some desperate gamblers have related that when first initiated into games of cards they found them tedious and dull. Perhaps by complaisant acceptance of social life, she might end by becoming enamored of society and turn out a fashionable woman.

She attended an elaborate luncheon that day,

and later went to the dramatic recital of a famous actress. It was the night of one of her own dinner-parties, and she had invited a hundred or more young people to a little dance afterwards. She did not permit herself to measure the ordeal. Henceforth she would keep to the surface of things. It is a sad mistake for a woman to take life seriously. "Let me live day by day, hour by hour," she prayed, "forgetting yesterday, and not dreaming of to-morrow."

Going about wherever she was invited, it fell out that dining one night at Mrs. Crooke Poorshaw's, she found herself at table sitting between Geddes Poorshaw, to whom she had been allotted by the hostess, and Holly Ruff. Only Milly herself happened to know that both were her rejected suitors, but each man was aware of his own indiscretion, and depended on the good services of the other for her entertainment. Poorshaw rarely talked, even when he had something to say, and how can a man have anything to say to a woman who has with the promptest decision answered his invitation to spend the remainder of her life with him in the negative? Although Holly Ruff's attention by right belonged to Miss Hurst, who was on his right, he threw himself into the breach when he observed Poorshaw's lack of resources. Perhaps Ruff wished to experiment a little, for suddenly changing his subject, he said, —

"By the bye, Mrs. Childe, you know my friend Breck, Sidney Breck, the architect?"

"Yes," said Milly, suddenly alive to her finger-ends, and, afraid of disclosing the truth, she raised her glass to her lips.

"Of course he has spoken to you of Miss Rivera?" Ruff pursued.

"Miss Rivera?" Milly repeated. Then perceiving something quickened and alert in Ruff's attitude, she said, "I suppose it must be Miss Rivera to whom Mr. Breck is engaged. I happen to know that he is engaged."

"I should be willing to stake something that he is not engaged to Miss Rivera," Poorshaw made haste to remark.

"Yes, he is engaged to Miss Rivera," said Ruff blandly. "Music has been the food of love in this case. She is a charming singer, and Breck is always infatuated about music."

"I myself have the honor of knowing Miss Rivera quite well," said Poorshaw, "and I could swear to it that she is not engaged to any man. I dare say Breck wants to marry her, but that does not establish his right to do so. She is a girl likely to pick and choose."

"She happens to be engaged all the same," said Ruff.

Poorshaw shrugged his shoulders and made a little gesture with the air of a man understanding his subject, but who restrains his tongue. Milly, listening, had turned with smiling eagerness first to one, then the other of the two men, with the air of one who sees a clear vista open where all was dark before.

"Tell me about this Miss Rivera," she exclaimed. "Who is she? What is she? Where is she?"

"You do not expect me to repeat a happy lover's confidences," said Ruff. "To begin with, she is adorable, in the second place she is adorable, and finally she is adorable."

"A charming description, but vague," said Milly. "Now, Mr. Poorshaw, can't you give me something more precise?"

"A very handsome girl," said Poorshaw, "Southern, you know, tropical, — Creole blood in her veins, — makes our women look waxen."

Milly seemed to see an apparition arise, but she compelled herself to smile and say, "And beside all this she sings! That is almost too much."

"She is poor," observed Poorshaw. "She feels compelled to be an artist of some sort."

"Of some sort," repeated Ruff incredulously. "I am afraid it is of some sort. She failed at a concert. Breck wanted me to attend, but I was too busy. I asked Lefferts about the effect she produced, and he said she was stiff and amateurish, — did not know how to let herself go."

"Contarini declared it was no failure, but a success," said Poorshaw, looking haughty.

"I dare say it was the fault of the public that she did not make a hit," said Ruff. "It shows the invariable lack of appreciation shown by swine for pearls."

"I don't myself consider that it makes an atom

of difference what the public or the critics say about her," said Poorshaw. "Sit by her and talk to her, and you will soon perceive that she was not made to be dependent on any one's favor."

Milly had maintained a simple demeanor, and had shown an obliging tact and ease with both men, but now was glad to rise with the other ladies and leave the men at table. She went on at once to a large reception and later to a dancing party. At the latter she encountered, among others, Paul Sécor, who had of late set himself the task of pleasing her. She was ready to smile upon him to-night, for he could at least save her the task of entertaining him. He was an endless talker when he had a companion to his liking, and she felt strangely self-absorbed, having a new idea to think of and a new voice at her ear. She was glad to possess some clew to the personality of Breck's fiancée. It is the unknown quantity which makes us restless. She was saying to herself that she would take an early occasion to ask Poorshaw all the particulars about this girl, — beautiful, poor, gifted, but not so successful but that she needed to be shielded. Milly seemed all at once to divine the whole meaning of the situation, and it touched her.

Meanwhile, she had sat down on a sofa with Paul Sécor under a small forest of palms. He had never felt so much encouraged as to-night, for Mrs. Lee Childe looked quietly pleased, and although it was evident that her imagination was

not always sufficiently active to follow his far-reaching suggestions, she evinced little reluctance to listen to the clever and audacious things he uttered, as was his habit, no matter whether they told for or against himself. The fact was that Milly hardly heard what he was saying. The discussion she had listened to was still in her ears, and some of Poorshaw's utterances were invested with fresh meanings. It was evident that he, too, had fallen in love with this Miss Rivera, who of course loved Breck. Although Geddes Poorshaw could offer the girl everything,— as the world calls everything, — it would never have occurred to Milly that any one could halt in choice between two such suitors. She tried to think of some plausible excuse for going to see this beautiful young girl. She might tell Miss Rivera she had heard of her voice, — that she was anxious to arrange some musicales for Lent. Geddes Poorshaw might give her a hint. Milly had the reputation of possessing a wonderful easy nonchalance in the way of doing things which other women halt before as indiscretions, and certainly she ought to be able readily to impose upon a novice.

Thus, while she was sitting beside Sécor, and answering his tentative and daring speeches at random, she was actually taken up by these schemes. There was a charm in the idea of helping to promote Sidney Breck's happiness, — of being always his good angel. She might never trust herself to meet him again, but her aching, passionate regrets

might find some symbol of expression which all his life long he would go on accepting, even when he only dimly remembered her face.

Mr. Whiley Norreys, disregarding the monopoly Paul Sécor piqued himself upon having successfully established, came up and spoke to her, and his action broke the spell. For the next hour she was surrounded, but when she was to leave the house she accepted Paul Sécor's arm to the carriage. Snow had fallen from the middle of the afternoon until midnight, when, the wind veering to the south, a heavy rain came, which, softening the six inches of snow, had made a frightful slush.

"Pleasant prospect for a poor devil who can't afford his own cab," said Sécor, standing under the awning and looking at Milly, as she bent forward to the open carriage window to say good-night.

"Jump in," she said unhesitatingly. "I will drop you at your rooms. Tell the man where they are."

Blessing his stars, and deciding that a propitious destiny favored him that night, Paul obeyed with a quick sense of relief. All that evening he had felt that he was at last beginning to make an impression upon the one woman in New York he cared to please. By a sudden bold stride he had advanced to the chief place with her. It was always his habit to formulate his experience with the fair sex. It was the unexpected, he affirmed, which charmed a woman. Women's lives are so

dull, so tideless; they like to be carried over their banks. Their horizon is so bounded by gray monotony, they are ready to be grateful to a man who lifts it and offers a fresh vista. A woman, he explained, never meets a man without confessing to herself at least that it is a toss-up whether she falls in love with him or not. All these views, based evidently, not on mere idle conjecture, not even on sentences out of phrase-books, but on sound experience, probably dictated Paul Sécor's present course. No sooner was he established by the side of Mrs. Lee Childe in the small, luxurious carriage, which was rolling down the avenue as rapidly as was possible in the deep slush, than, with two words of preamble, he put his arm about his companion and made an effort to kiss her.

Milly, in her way, was also a mistress of the unexpected. She pulled the string with unmistakable imperiousness; the carriage stopped, and the man opened the door.

"Mr. Sécor will get out," she said quietly; and Mr. Sécor accordingly did get out in the middle of Madison Avenue, in the pouring rain.

It has always been a question open to discussion whether Clive Newcome did or did not kiss his cousin Ethel in the Brighton tunnel. Within five days after this episode, Paul Sécor's little indiscretion was the gossip of the town, and the disputed question was what compensations sweetened the condign punishment meted out to him.

One side argued that a woman so prompt in action was certain to have lost no time; but, then, it must be admitted that if she had been successful in defeating his intention, she hardly needed to be so implacable.

Another question might have been, who had told the story? Nobody suspected Mrs. Lee Childe of disclosing the secret; her servants were models of discretion, while, as all the world knew, Paul Sécor liked *une aventure de plus*, whether it went crooked or smooth for him. But would even Paul Sécor let himself be laughed at for a complete fiasco?

He was a cousin on the Lee side of the house, while Archy Laing's mother had been a Childe. The two clans always regarded each other with more or less well-concealed hostility, yet it might not be an easy matter to explain why Paul Sécor's presumption should have encouraged Archy Laing to come forward. He perhaps argued that, not being so enterprising as Sécor, he was in no danger of having his new evening clothes spoiled; but the argument employed by his sister, Mrs. Ferris, and his aunt, Mrs. Fletcher, was that no moment could be so auspicious for him to press his suit as this, when Milly Childe's own consciousness must be echoing what all New York was telling her, that she was too young, too attractive, and, above all, too rich to go about the world without a husband to protect her.

Archy was perfectly willing to play that rôle,

his only fault was that he liked delightful results independent of tedious processes. He admired Milly, her good looks, her *chic*, — above all, a certain high-mindedness of which the tradition ran in the family, substantiated by the fact that although every cent of her money was so strictly tied up it had to go through her hands, yet her first husband had never needed to be galled by a feeling of dependence. A large sum had been paid to Lee Childe's bankers quarterly, and no questions were asked as to how it was spent. There was something royal about such a woman, and no doubt she was lonely on her throne. Accordingly, one Sunday night, after the family party had broken up, just as Milly was taking a book, with a sense of relief at being left alone, she looked up and saw Archy in the doorway.

"So you have come back," she said.

"I have not been away, only across the hall," said Archy. "I wanted to ask your advice, so waited after the rest were gone."

"I am the last person in the world to come to for advice," said Milly. "I always make mistakes in my own affairs, — have a fatal facility for blunders."

"You are, by all odds, the cleverest person in the family," said Archy, still hovering, but approaching closer and closer.

"Not half so clever as you, Archy," retorted Milly. "You always get precisely what you want out of the world."

By this time he had established himself very comfortably on the other side of the table which held the reading-lamp. If he had any prescience that this table might prove an obstacle, he relegated that question to the future, for the chair looked especially inviting.

"That is what I should like to do," he said. "I confess that some few desirable things have come in my way without much trouble on my part, but now that I desire something very particular I don't dare flatter myself it will drop into my mouth when I look up and long for it."

Milly laid her book on the table, and glancing at her visitor with a lazy smile and half-closed eyes, observed: —

"You seem to be talking about the golden apples of Hesperides."

The allusion to "golden apples" tried his self-possession, but he carried off any embarrassment with a laugh, saying: —

"They always hang high, and are guarded by a dragon, I suppose."

"You want my advice, perhaps, as to how to kill that dragon," suggested Milly.

"Exactly," said Archy, in capital spirits, until an exhortation of his sister's tugged at his conscience with a reminder that he had promised to be seriously in earnest. This was no idle flirtation, Mrs. Ferris had warned him; he must show himself capable of deep and sincere emotion. In order to move a clever woman of the world like

Milly Childe, who could turn any man round her finger, he must himself be moved. So, pulling himself up, as it were, he proceeded: —

"I take it, there is only one important subject for a man or a woman."

"Of course," said Milly; "looked at from a religious point of view, there is only" —

"Oh, I don't go in for that yet," said Archy. "Of course, I want my heavenly kingdom when the right time comes, but just at present I should be quite satisfied with an earthly heritage."

"There is a neighbor of mine in a small way in the country, whom I go to see occasionally," observed Milly, "who always looks at me from head to foot, shakes his head, and says, 'I don't care nought about the honors of the world, the riches, or the pleasures on 't.' Evidently you do not agree with him."

"I am afraid not," responded Archy.

"By the bye, what is your idea of an earthly kingdom?" she asked suddenly.

"I'm not hard to suit, — no sublime discontent about me," returned Archy, conscious all the while that he was dancing to her piping when it behooved him to be the piper. "I simply ask for a comfortable house, a fair income to maintain it, and a handsome wife, who understands how to make things go off well. The rest will come of itself."

"Certainly there is nothing unattainable about such ambitions. Have you picked out the wife you want?" demanded Milly.

"I picked her out long ago."

"Oh, you are engaged!"

"Oh, no, no, not yet, I am sorry to say," returned Archy, reddening slightly, and his smile a little too broad and vague.

"What hinders you?" inquired Milly, with wide-open eyes.

"Don't you see," said Archy in a wheedling voice, "a man grows timid when so much depends upon the results of his confession. It may be easy enough to make love when nothing is at stake, but"—

"Do you mean the wife or the income?" Milly interrupted. Their eyes met, and both laughed. "I suppose," she added, "you might like to have them identical."

"That would suit me capitally," Archy retorted. "Everybody knows that I have no income except the beggarly nine hundred I earn downtown. It runs in the Childe family to be deadbeats. You know by experience that, so far as money is concerned, we are all played out. Our grandfathers used to be rich, but they thoughtlessly ate their cake and left their descendants to find their own bread and butter."

"Unless they can make a fortune by marriage. I take it," remarked Milly sweetly, "that the wife you have selected is well off."

"Very well off indeed," said Archy demurely.

"What a comfort!"

"Both a comfort and a difficulty," explained

Archy. "How should you advise me to get over the difficulty in order to experience the comfort of it?"

"I see," Milly exclaimed. "You are not in love with her. 'My poverty, but not my will consents,' that is your motto."

Impossible to tell whether she were laughing at him or not. He had had many warnings about the amplitude of Milly Childe's sleeve. He tried to infuse a gentle melancholy into his tone and look.

"Indeed, I am in love with her," he said reproachfully. "You know a man can't invariably be at high pressure. Besides, I have always observed that a calm and rational affection is the best foundation to marry on. Blazing passion burns itself out, and then where are you?"

"What sort of a woman is it for whom you feel this rational affection?" inquired Milly, as if weighing the subject.

Archy had begun to find the table an impediment, and had gradually wheeled his fauteuil round the corner until he was at a right angle to the object of his pursuit. Now, feeling that the time had come to grapple, as it were, with the enemy, he propelled his armchair towards Milly with such force that, running with unexpected freedom on the casters, he came up to her full tilt.

"Oh, I beg pardon," said he. "I did not intend to overwhelm you." Then leaning forward and looking up into her face with his most cherubic

expression, he went on. "I should describe her as being very much like yourself."

"Oh, indeed."

"It is yourself, cousin Milly," he exclaimed, throwing reserve to the winds. "Of course you understood me all the time. No use trying to beat about the bush with a clever woman like you. Say you will marry me. Come, now, I 'm awfully fond of you."

"No, thanks," said Milly. "I'm exceedingly grateful, but" —

She had been so pretty, so smiling, had listened with such apparent interest, he had actually begun to believe that his bow, drawn half at a venture, was not to miss its mark.

"Don't talk about gratitude," he said, wounded by this sudden perfidy; "it sounds as if you were ironical or sarcastic."

"I am," said Milly. "It is a fault of mine, — a fault some people say I cultivate."

"I know they say it," Archy returned with feeling, "and I have often denied it. I always insist that you really are the best-natured woman alive, and that if you seem ironical or sarcastic it is the fault of the life you lead. It cannot be a healthy sort of life for a woman: nobody with any real authority over you; nobody to protect you from gossip and calumny; unlimited means, and half a dozen fellows pretending to be in love with you when actually all they care about is your money."

"Thank you, cousin Archy, for putting the case before me so plainly," said Milly. "What you say is absolutely true."

However, she was able to convince him that he had listened to bad advisers when he came to offer his services in her behalf. She had had many visions of late of some special plan of action; her course of thought advancing, then halting, and receding before some obstacle, finally readvancing on surer lines. Nobody could fathom her caprices, and a great many of her friends and well-wishers were telling each other in these days that Milly was too reckless, that it was not an easy matter for a woman who uttered speeches so little difficult to misrepresent to keep herself from being talked about. She seemed sometimes to take a malicious pleasure in withdrawing her own personality and substituting in its place a capricious being who said and did what might answer for the moment, but left an impression adverse to what her friends desired.

Nobody saw this deepening tendency towards levity with more solicitude than Whiley Norreys. He was an admirable judge of time and seasons, and he had decided not to come forward with his offer until mid-Lent, when the present gay whirl would be a pensive memory. But there was something erratic about Mrs. Lee Childe of late, and she had been heard to say that she liked southern Italy in the early springtime. So it behooved him not to waver, but to press forward to the breach.

It is not altogether a pleasant matter for *un homme sérieux* to seem to reverse all his plans, and prudence whispered that there might be a certain awkwardness if, — that is — but upon the whole that was impossible. The Paul Sécor adventure had proved that Mrs. Lee Childe needed a husband's protection, and in this crisis Whiley Norreys felt that no other man's lot but his own had leapt from the urn.

He approached his subject guardedly. He had dropped in to see her one howling February morning when few visitors were likely to be abroad.

"I wanted to tell you, Mrs. Childe," he said after a few opening preliminaries concerning the weather, "how much I admired your gown last evening."

"Oh, I am so much obliged to you," murmured Milly.

"That gown was, I consider, a *chef d'œuvre.* I have thought of it many times since."

"Oh, it was my gown you came to see. Shall I send for my maid to bring it down to you, Mr. Norreys?"

"Is not your gown a part of yourself, and, in fact, an important part? Properly speaking, a gown is not a gown until its owner gives it style, shape, and individuality; then it becomes part of her visible personality. When I thought of the gown I naturally thought of you."

"Alas," said Milly, "I have so many gowns that if I were to distribute my identity between

them I should have none left for my poor shivering self. I go with you, Mr. Norreys, so far as to agree that a gown ought to express a woman, but to effect this she must wear it habitually. I myself never really like one of my dresses until I have worn it so many times that my maid insists it is a wreck. I often reflect that if I could be permitted to wear my clothes until they were all in creases and holes I might be a better woman."

Milly was sitting on a low and luxurious sofa, and had on a pretty house-gown of soft tints, softened still more by ribbons and lace. She looked slender, pale, but charming, — half like a nymph, half like a queen. This nonchalance became her, thought Mr. Whiley Norreys, surveying her with the sure eye of a clever adversary, as he sat in an easy-chair at her left, his back to the windows, the glow of the distant fire in his face; well dressed, — a beautiful scarf-pin in an immaculate azure scarf which became his complexion; one glove off, which it was a sensible relief at times to flap with his gloved hand; his hat and cane on the floor. He had chosen his position with a view to future manœuvres.

"Now that is a very interesting psychological problem," he remarked admiringly, in reply to Milly's statement.

"Don't you see," she explained, "that when a woman wears a gown day after day, it has all sorts of suggestions and associations for her. Every patch and darn recalls an indiscretion it

may be good for her not to forget, and the spot which has to be hidden at once makes her prudent and reserved, besides keeping in her own mind what she ought to remember. Do you not remember Heine's friend, the learned student, who made use of each article of his dress and of the furniture of his room for a system of mnemonics, by which he fixed dates and philosophical theories in his head? Thus he grew fidgety if anybody moved a chair or even a pair of snuffers, because it disarranged his arguments for the immortality of the soul; and when his landlady insisted that his shirts, neckties, and stockings should go into the wash, he possessed no longer any clew to Assyrian history."

"I do not happen to remember that part of Heine," said Norreys.

"Just so with my gowns. As I was saying, if I could but wear one all the time, I might remember friends, foes, benefits, injuries; as it is, I retain no fixed impression. By the exigencies of civilized society, I am never permitted to get used to my gowns, and the result is I can have no reminiscences, no associations, no poetry, no romance. I live in a blur."

Mr. Norreys surveyed her as she quietly uttered these revelations with his large, bland smile, but his eyelids narrowed. Probably he was saying to himself, "Too much wit, too much wit;" but what he remarked was, "Wealth imposes obligations."

"A lady's maid does," said Milly. "Mine has her ideals, and the ignoble practice of economy is not one of them. If anybody inquired what was my ideal of earthly happiness, — which nobody ever yet did take the trouble to do, by the way, — it would be living without a maid. I am always plotting to escape her; it is of no use. If I go to my room, she is there; if I retreat into any other sanctuary, she is there before me. 'Could n't you just as well do that in some other place?' I ask her; then she enters upon laborious explanations, until I admit there is reason for her omnipresence. If there were another woman in the house to speak to, — a mother, sister, daughter, female friend, — I might, perhaps" —

"You sometimes feel lonely then, Mrs. Childe," observed Mr. Norreys, with the tenderest intonation.

"Very often; in fact, constantly," said Milly.

"I was sure of it," he exclaimed triumphantly. He leaned forward. "Sometimes," he went on tenderly, "I have seen in your eyes — what shall I call it? — a longing to escape."

"You define my feeling exactly," said Milly. "I often have a lively desire to run away; but, actually, I did suppose I hid it successfully."

"Not from me; my sympathy is too deep."

"Oh, you also wish to run away!"

"I know my obligations too well," said Norreys. "My position is, of course, less arduous than yours; still, my duties towards society are well

defined. I realize how cruel it is for a woman like yourself to have to bear all the burdens your position imposes. Often, when I watch you receiving company, with a slight frown of weariness on your brow, I have thought that the load ought to be lifted from you."

"I am often bored to extinction," said Milly, "but I try not to let myself be worried by trifles."

"'Mistress of herself, though china fall,'" quoted Norreys admiringly. "That, of course, is a homely illustration, and relates to a more primitive state of civilization than ours at present; but there is always a possibility that trifles will go wrong, and that they will, momentarily at least, assume exaggerated importance. Every house requires, not only its sovereign, but its Bismarck or Gladstone. Some person with strength to meet emergencies has to be told that the boiler has burst, — that the water requires to be shut off, — that a gas-pipe leaks; and I confess that my homage to your sex is so deep, so chivalrous, it seems a cruel diminution of the prerogatives of a beautiful woman to have her attention called to such annoyances."

"Does Mr. Gladstone attend to such matters for Her Majesty?" Milly inquired, as if athirst for information.

Mr. Norreys's oblique gaze narrowed again. "Of course," he said, changing his attitude slightly, and once more assuming an upright po-

sition, "I was speaking figuratively. What I meant to say was this: In order to have a well-regulated house, some efficient person must take a great deal of trouble. Now, the mere necessity of keeping a coachman in order, eager and willing to have his horses out at all hours of the day and night, and in all weathers, has embittered the existence of a great many women. Then, as regards entertaining, there come up perpetually so many nice and delicate questions, — minor details, yet, actually, of the most far-reaching importance. For example, it is so essential that the right people should meet the right people, and although with us the question of precedence is not yet governed by the arbitrary rules which settle it in the Old World, still, it is of vital moment to the correct arrangement of a dinner-table that each guest should be placed in a way to show his true value. I have actually had my digestion endangered before now by being requested to take out the wrong woman."

"I have been put into a towering rage, if that is what you mean," said Milly, "by being taken out by the wrong man."

"Of course, of course," said Norreys soothingly. "The comfort of each guest depends on these seemingly insignificant details of arrangement, and a mind of far-reaching insight — even imagination — is required to foresee the possibilities of each distinct social occasion. Then there remains the question of supreme importance, —

one on which no woman can be expected to have either true feeling or experienced judgment. I allude, of course, to the subject of wines. Of course, you may give your butler general orders as to what brands shall be served, but the question is, '*How* will they be served?' Will they be decanted as if they were so much water from the Croton hydrant? What will be the temperature of the claret and burgundy, and will the champagne be *frappé* or *glacé?* Plenty of high-priced butlers do not understand the difference between the two processes."

"You touch my conscience," said Milly. "I don't know the difference between champagne hot or cold. I supposed it was Wilkins's mission to attend to those matters."

"It belongs to a connoisseur, and only to a connoisseur," said Mr. Norreys, with feeling. "You would not send one of your men to buy you a picture; well, the correct serving of wines is just as much a question of high art, and can only be determined by the *cognoscente.*"

"Mercy on us," said Milly; "you make life a very serious affair. I feel like Dr. Johnson when he heard the young lady's performance on the piano, and was told it was difficult. 'Difficult!' he repeated; 'I wish it were impossible.'"

Mr. Norreys smiled.

"What I mean is," he said, with an easy gesture of his smooth, plump hand, which hovered for a moment over Milly's lace and ribbons, as if it

longed to alight there, but then settled on his own knee, "that these labors, counting for more in civilized life than the labors of Hercules, do exist, but that a woman like yourself, and in your position, ought never to feel the burdens or the perplexities they entail. You should have the bead of the wine, not the lees, — the rose without the thorn. You need, at every step of your career, some one to whom you can turn, on whom you may rely; so that, in short" —

"I have Wilkins," said Milly, as if bewildered, "and he has an assistant, — two, if he wants them; then there is Mrs. Clark, who was Mrs. Childe's factotum for long years. Actually, there does not seem to be room for any one else in the establishment."

"My dear Mrs. Childe," Mr. Norreys began —

"And after all," Milly proceeded, "if I stop short of poisoning people I do no actual harm. I remember George Sand remarking in one of her letters, with some complacency, that she has never pampered the gluttony of her guests. Henceforth I will accept that as my true aim. And as to the wrong people sitting down by the wrong people, those tribulations are good for the soul. I myself have gained great altitudes, and don't despair altogether of finally reaching heaven by just such sacrifices."

"My dear Mrs. Childe," said Whiley Norreys, once more trying to stem the flood of her eloquence, his hand again in air, and this time actually

touching the furbelows of her gown, "what you need is not a servant, no paid subordinate, no hireling, but" — with a soft smile and bending towards her as he spoke — "a husband."

"Oh, a husband," said Milly, as if confounded, at the same time altering her position slightly so that his hand descended on a down cushion beside her. Then, as if rallying, she went on: "Evidently, Mr. Norreys, you know very little about domestic life if you fancy that the rôle a husband plays in domestic life is to oil the machinery and make everything go smoothly. No, what he actually does is to forget until the last moment that it is the night of the dinner-party; and then, at having to throw over some delightful plan of his own, he descends cross and irritable, ready to scowl at each guest as he or she enters, with an expression as if saying, 'What, you here? What the devil were you invited for?' Again, upsetting all the careful table arrangements by refusing point blank to take the right woman to table, because he dislikes her conversation, or because her nose grows red by the second course. Then, frowning at his wife across the length of the board, making signals impossible to comprehend, causing her to feel that some dire catastrophe is likely to happen in another moment. Finally, after the guests have departed, throwing a flood of light on his behavior by the information that she has used his favorite sherry, the brand he had bought at endless expense for his own particular circle of cronies. That is what a husband is, Mr. Norreys."

"Ah, Mrs. Childe, if that has been your experience" —

"Oh, no, not exactly my own personal experience. Poor Lee used to shrug his shoulders and say he did not care who came so long as he had no trouble in the matter. He never found fault with the wines or the food, because he could neither eat or drink. He lived on air the last three years of his life. No, my knowledge of the habits of husbands was compiled from the confessions of my female friends."

"Let me have the honor of showing you what a husband can be," said Norreys. "I assure you, Mrs. Childe, I will give you a domestic happiness not only beyond your experience, but perhaps beyond your imagination."

"Oh, Mr. Norreys," said Milly, "I beg you will not" —

"Listen to me, Mrs. Childe," he returned indulgently, but firmly. "I have thought a great deal about this matter. I have looked at it from every light. You are certain to marry, — you will be obliged to marry in self-defense, and nowhere can you find a suitor so disinterested as myself. Here you have enormous responsibilities, a great position which you must seek not only to maintain but compel to offer you its full advantages. You yourself have more than once confessed to me that you are not willing to grapple with certain difficulties. And you are right. You are young, beautiful, light-hearted; you like to be on the top crest of

the wave, so to speak. Now, I am solid, thorough. You need me. Just look at the subject dispassionately, and you will concede that of all women you most require a companion, guide, and familiar friend, — that is, myself. No other man could possibly supply just what you lack. Together we could do anything we wished to do; we could actually lead New York society."

"Oh, Mr. Norreys," said Milly ardently, "I do so fully appreciate your courage, your splendid self-denial, your" —

"You accept me then?" He bent forward with rapture.

"Oh, no, no, no. I could not think of it. It is impossible. For one thing, Wilkins would not stay in the house an hour if he were ordered about and looked after."

"Let him go, then," said Mr. Norreys.

"I could not live without Wilkins," said Milly. "Really, Mr. Norreys, I feel as if you did not quite appreciate him, for your description of a factotum fitted him to a nicety. He never tells me the boiler has burst, or that the coachman refuses to get his horses out when I need them, and once, hearing strange noises in the pipes, he actually got up quietly in the dead of night and shut off the water in some occult way, — actually saved us from being flooded, for there was a dangerous leak somewhere."

The two regarded each other for a moment in silence. Mr. Norreys's face was already red, and

it constantly grew more and more inflamed, until it became a deep crimson.

"And besides," Milly went on in a very soft, languid voice, "I do not expect to marry. To my thinking, a woman almost twenty-eight years of age, who has for five years been a widow, needs to be cautious, very cautious, indeed. She has a long life before her, and has already lost a great many of the illusions which make marriage seem the natural solution of her destiny. Accordingly, Mr. Norreys, I am not likely to change my condition, but I am grateful to you for your good intentions, most grateful."

"I do not like to forebode disaster, Mrs. Childe," said Norreys, in the voice of one who foresees catastrophes he might have prevented, "but" —

"Don't," said Milly. She rose. The rejected suitor also rose.

"I think your best friends must be puzzled to account for your conduct," he remarked. "I really feel" —

"So do I," said Milly mournfully. "Good-morning."

X.

TOWARDS four o'clock one dull day in February, Miss Rivera emerged from her room in a pretty toilette, and entering the small parlor, she was just choosing a Bon Silène from a superb bunch of roses which filled a bowl, when a tap came at the door. She was expecting a visitor, and this sound, confirming her belief that it had been worth while to make herself as charming as possible, communicated fresh brightness to her eyes and a heightened color to her cheeks.

"Come in," she said, after giving herself time to settle the rosebud safely in the lace at her throat, and then stood with a kittenish air of innocence and demure surprise, waiting to have her visitor appear. The door opened, but instead of the tall, heavy-shouldered, masculine visitor she had expected, a slender figure in gray filled up the doorway. Anita gazed at the vision in a vague alarm.

"Oh, excuse me," she murmured, "I thought it was" —

"Is this Miss Rivera?" said the visitor, advancing a step.

"Yes," said Anita. "I" —

The lady had by this time entered and closed the door behind her.

"Perhaps," she said with a smile, "you may have heard Mr. Breck speak of me. I am Mrs. Lee Childe."

Miss Rivera's mobile face, which had by turns taken every variety of expression, now glowed with satisfaction.

"Oh, I am very glad to see you," she said fervently.

"Mr. Breck has spoken of me, then?"

"Not lately; but once he told me he had attended a great reception at your house. That was months ago. But Mr. Poorshaw has spoken of you, and I read your name in the papers so constantly."

Milly stood for one moment in silence looking at the girl. Her heart experienced one pang, then the real depth and truth and sweetness of her nature stirred itself, and she was glad that Breck's fiancée was so lovely; for she happened to see Anita at a moment when every possibility of her face was revealed: the large, startled, splendid eyes, the sudden flash of color, the first soft roguishness of the smile changing into a soft pouting surprise, all helped to give her a surpassing beauty. It was, too, the bright saucy beauty of a young creature whose look of ardent life suggested that she had been caught in some mischievous gambols which she was eager to resume.

"I hope you will forgive my coming to see you," said Milly, "but I wanted to meet you, — to hear you sing."

Anita made a little gesture.

"I don't believe it was Mr. Breck who told you that I sang," she said, laughing and blushing.

"Why not? Why should he not have told me?"

"Because Mr. Breck has no great belief in my voice," said Anita. "He has quite given up the idea that I could ever be a great singer."

"Perhaps," said Milly, coming closer to the girl and taking her hand and looking at her with a soft, admiring smile, "he has at heart other hopes and wishes for you."

Anita laughed; her consciousness thrilled all through with the flattery of her visitor's look and manner.

"I cannot give up everything most precious to me for anybody's hopes and wishes," she returned.

"So you are anxious to be a great singer," Milly now said, continually fascinated by the girl's vivid coloring, — her air of superabundant life.

"Has not a woman a life of her own to lead?" said Anita. "If you had some artistic gift, Mrs. Childe, something that thrilled you with a sense of having power to do what you liked with, and which made everyday life seem poor and dull and tame and sad, should you be willing to give it up and sacrifice a possibly brilliant future? It seems to me like putting away the great glorious sun and accepting a dim little candle in its place. But then, you could not feel as I do, — your life gives you everything; there is no cramp and pettiness

from which you daily beg to be delivered. So you cannot quite judge what art means to me."

She poured out her words with a soft vehemence, smiling constantly, yet with charming cadences expressive at times of high disdain.

"But," said Milly archly, "Mr. Breck told me you were engaged to him."

"That was not quite fair," retorted Anita.

"Not fair? Of course I shall not repeat it; but I wanted to explain — "

"I do not call it an engagement exactly," said Anita eagerly. "I have never absolutely promised, — I told him I could not make up my mind in a moment."

"Is not that a little cruel, — if you love him?"

"But I do not say that I do love him," said Anita, blushing and dimpling with laughter. "Of course I know that he is charming, lovable, clever, and that he is in love with me." This was so roguishly said that any momentary effect of personal vanity was surmounted by the charm of her candor. "When he is here," she went on, "I sometimes feel as if, after all, nothing could be so sweet as giving up, — being carried away by a power one does not care to resist." There was a curve in her lips as she said this, an arch of the brow, and a laughing side glance of the eye which cast its spell over Milly. "But after he has gone," proceeded Anita, "I shake myself, as it were, say to myself, 'You little fool, how can you let yourself be duped,— how can you be blinded by

illusions?' For I know very clearly what I want in the world, and it is not love in a cottage, even with Sidney Breck."

They had sat down side by side on a little sofa. Milly's impressions were vividly clear, but not broad. They took in but two realities: one was that the girl was pretty, piquant, and irresistible, the other that Breck was naturally and inevitably in love with her. No need for mistakes; all was plain, straightforward, tangible. Every word the girl uttered was a suggestion opening up far vistas. She knew the way to hold a lover, half-denying, half-complying. Milly was stung anew by self-scorn. Anita was so thrillingly pretty; not only her face, but her shape, her hands, her wrists.

"I am frank," Anita went on, "but something in your face makes it easy to tell you everything."

"I am Mr. Breck's warm friend, — and yours," said Milly.

"I grow furious with wrath sometimes, you see," Anita went on, "because I can't help considering him a little domineering. He asked me to marry him at a moment when I was utterly discouraged. I had made what seemed to me a miserable failure at a concert and felt that everything was at an end, — that nothing mattered."

"But was not that the very moment for the man who loved you to speak?" cried Milly. "He wanted to shield you, to comfort you, — to" —

"Of course he meant well," said Anita, "but for all that it was not precisely fair. He knows

that I hate poverty; but just at that moment I had given up, and he took advantage of my weakness."

"Your weakness! Do you try to believe you are not a little wee bit in love with him?"

"I have had no time to care about such things," said Anita. "You cannot think what an absurd jumble Sidney's ideas of our future make with mine. I suppose he is half joking, for he is always quoting, 'You must burn the gods you used to worship and worship the gods you used to burn.'"

"That is, you must give up your unrest, your self-love, your selfish ambition," said Milly with swift insight. "You must feel childlike faith and hope and belief. No more looking before and after and pining for what is not" —

"All that and more," said Anita, laughing. "He tries to convince me that nothing is so delightful as poverty. He jokes about our living in one room, and my cooking his meals and mending his clothes. Of course he is not poor like that. My brother Hugh says that Champion & Breck do a very fair business, and that Sidney ought to have at least four or five thousand a year. But after all, what is five thousand a year when I might hope to make at least that a week?"

Milly did not answer for a moment; she was perhaps weighing the two budgets: Sidney Breck's five thousand a year against Miss Rivera's, — how many weeks in the year did she expect to make a thousand dollars a night?

"Sidney sees life very simply," Anita went on. "I tell him he is so refined himself that he needs none of the refinements of life. Now I do. I am a practical, actual person; I love so many things; I need to be pampered a little. I worship luxury. There are two ways for a woman to make money: one is by marrying, the other by becoming a singer or an actress."

"Some women do both," said Milly.

"I do not believe Sidney would permit his wife to do anything in public, and he does not believe in my voice. But then he is fastidious; he insists on some unspeakable perfection. He never will admit that a lucky or unlucky opportunity is behind success or failure. He will never agree with me that the reason I was received coldly was because I wore the wrong sort of gown."

"The wrong sort of gown?" repeated Milly.

"A woman can understand these matters," said Anita, longing for a sympathizer.

"Tell me about the gown," said Milly, meeting her half way.

Anita poured out the story, not sparing the fallacy of Maddy's infallible recipes for picking and choosing. Anita did more than describe the imperfections of the yellow satin and lace gown; she presented the whole situation dramatically, showed Sidney Breck sitting in judgment on the toilette, and approving with his eyes, to say nothing of his words. She was a true *raconteuse*, and hated to spoil a narrative by leaving out vivid and

effective touches wherever they were needed. More than before, Milly was now convinced of Breck's long and fervid passion, his intimate comings and goings. A girl does not try on her new gowns before unfamiliar friends.

"I dare say the gown was extremely pretty," she remarked, "only it was worn at the wrong time. Did nobody praise your singing?"

"I was going to tell you that next day, just a little too late, I was in very good spirits again, for the papers all spoke well of me."

"Did not that convince Mr. Breck?"

"He said that his friend Mr. Ruff was powerful with the critics and had given them a hint."

"I want you to sing for me," said Milly. "I came to ask you to sing at a musicale at my house, — two musicales, three, if you like. One must keep something going in Lent. Now let me hear you, — that is, if you are willing to try."

Anita was more than willing, eager. She had divined that Mrs. Lee Childe had something in view, and this was the chance she courted. She inquired what songs her patroness wished to hear, — then, kindled, sang not only her best, but beyond what had hitherto been her best. Milly was ready to admire, but she was startled. Here was a singer indeed; a mezzo voice of marvelously rich and sympathetic quality, and possessing a range which gave her the advantage of a soprano; wonderfully flexible, too, and exquisitely correct in intonation. She sprang up and kissed the girl.

"My dear," she said, "you are wonderful."

"I do not always sing like that," returned Anita, glowing like a gem. "You inspire me. Some people paralyze me" —

"You need not think of them. With such a voice and such skill, your path to success shines definite and certain. I will invite all the people who make opinions. Drawing-room celebrities are the fashion nowadays."

"I know," said Anita. "It is just the way I have longed to be launched."

"If I were you," said Milly, "I should aim at becoming a singer of songs. It is quite time we had a real singer. The world is in danger of forgetting what songs are. A song is to the opera what a lyric is to the drama. The heart of the whole thing is in it. At least, you shall sing songs at my musicale."

They plotted together how to make the affair most successful; how to strike the key-note; how to grasp the situation and compel it to yield all that it contained.

"And I must not make any mistake about my gown this time," said Anita. "You will know, Mrs. Childe, exactly what I ought to wear."

"You will go to my dressmaker," said Milly. "She can suggest, and then we will choose. Not that it makes any particular difference. Your voice is beyond reach of those trivial accidents,— it would triumph over a Mother Hubbard gown." Then another danger suddenly hove into sight. "But will Mr. Breck like it?" she asked.

"I am not his slave yet," said Anita exultingly. "I need not ask whether he likes it or not. In fact, if he cares about me as he ought, he should be enchanted with whatever I do. Though he sometimes makes me half in love with what I hate, he understands very well that nothing will satisfy me except doing something that everybody bows down before. When I was a tiny little girl I made up my mind that I must be clever and win greatness. If I saw people rich and successful and happy, I would clench my little fist and stamp my little foot, and say, 'The time will come when I shall look down upon them.'"

"Be thankful that you were not born with everything, — that you have been allowed to feel the spur which comes from needs. There is no inspiration in possession" —

"There is no inspiration in longing to have things one cannot get," said Anita. "What one needs is to have the object not beyond reach. Sometimes this poor life of make-shifts, this hideous little room, frets and jars me so that I can do nothing but get into a rage."

Milly's eyes traveled slowly around the parlor, not a detail of which she had yet observed.

"I am sure the room looks to me extremely pretty;" she said, "so much color and variety. And you have superb flowers; I suppose I need not ask who sends them to you," she smiled archly. She seemed by this time to have lived down every pang.

"Not Mr. Breck; I assure you he is too matter-of-fact to send me cut flowers. Indeed, he hates cut flowers, — he says the sight of them hurts him," said Anita. "His traits are so oddly contrasted,— he is so romantic in some ways, and so painfully practical in others. When there is any question of self-indulgence he seizes the chance to deny himself."

"But he does not enforce self-denial upon you?"

"Not yet," said Anita with much emphasis. "What do you suppose he sent me at Christmas? Twenty yards of gray crêpe de chine for a gown. He said he wanted me to have it made simply, and that I should be presentable for any occasion."

"Ah," cried Milly, "a girl may trust a man who observes her needs and helps her. A woman realizes the worth of these little indications more than a girl."

"I am not an unnatural creature," said Anita, "and I was charmed by his goodness. Still it does not answer my ideas of what a man madly in love ought to do. I like foolish outlay, nonsensical extravagance. I should prefer to have a man spend all his money on one single, flawless diamond for the girl he worships than to save it up to buy kitchen utensils."

Milly glanced again at the flowers with an expression on her face which brought a blush to Anita's cheeks.

"Mr. Poorshaw sent them to me," she said. "I

believe he is very rich, so such lavishness does not count with him?"

Milly caught the little round soft hand.

"I hope, dear," she said, "you are not making a mistake. You are not playing Geddes Poorshaw against Mr. Breck? You let it be understood that you are engaged?"

"But I do not call myself engaged," said Anita. "Mr. Poorshaw knows that Sidney is my particular friend, and that is quite enough."

"Mr. Poorshaw does not make love to you?" said Milly.

"Indeed he does not make love to me," said Anita quickly, noticing the expression on Milly's face; that face so luminous, so sweet, so full of sympathy, but which at this allusion to Mr. Poorshaw showed a flash of the blue eyes like a sword coming out of a silken sheath. Never had Anita been so anxious to please any one as she was now to please Mrs. Lee Childe. "I am not thinking of lovers," she added, lifting her head with a charming young dignity. "I shall think of nothing but the songs I am to practice for your musicale."

Milly's thoughts had reverted, for the first time since she entered, to her idea that Geddes Poorshaw was himself in love with Miss Rivera, but undoubtedly if he had any such pretensions they had been but matter for an idle hour. This quick rush of sympathy for Breck ardently in love with a girl who was all the time accepting the attentions of a richer man had somehow chilled her. The throb of

impulse to say more subsided to a dumb yearning of feeling, which Anita was thrilled by as Milly clasped her and kissed her. "I shall come again very soon," she said, "and you must consult Mr. Contarini and bring him to see my rooms."

Then she went away.

Anita had been bright, gay, spontaneous with Milly, and now left alone she had no qualms of conscience over anything that she had said. Still it must be confessed that, the moment the sound of her visitor's footsteps died away, she exclaimed audibly: —

"Very lucky he did not happen to come while she was here."

She had, however, a wonderful new idea to contemplate, and she sat down to brood, not upon possible lovers, but upon the musicale, the thoughts of which opened a vista for her generous imagination to fill up. Within five minutes, however, there came a second tap at the door, and this time at her "Come in" Geddes Poorshaw entered.

"Oh! who do you think has been here?" cried Anita.

"I know only too well," he replied. "I have been dodging her coachman and groom for half an hour, waiting for her to go away."

"You knew Mrs. Lee Childe was here then?"

"Yes; I was not surprised. She had spoken of coming to see you to ask you to sing at a musicale."

"Why did you not tell me?"

"I hoped it was only one of her thousand caprices. I do not see why you should be patronized in that way."

"In that way? It is what I have longed for. I have heard of artists who sang at private concerts in Paris and St. Petersburg, who were loaded with jewels which the great ladies tore off their necks and arms to give them."

"Ah, it is the jewels you want," said Poorshaw, who had not sat down, but stood leaning on the back of a chair, and looking down at the girl.

"It is everything. I would rather be Patti for one evening than Queen of England for her whole life."

He laughed. "You are ambitious. Well, be Patti if you can, only you must go the right way to work."

"What is the right way to go to work?"

"Marry me. I will take you abroad and you shall have every advantage. If you want to sing in public, you shall sing in public; if you want to go on the stage, you shall go on the stage."

"Marry you!" shrieked Anita. "I am an artist. I do not wish to impede my career."

"I should say your career was somewhat impeded already. What I offer is to remove certain obstacles."

"What obstacles?"

"You told me yesterday that you were to have a happy day to-day because your sister was to spend the afternoon and night at her mother's,

and accordingly you would not be pulled about and distracted by those three youngsters. You have no freedom, you are cramped and restricted. Now I happen to have money enough to give your tastes and inclinations free vent. I should rather like to see what a girl like you could turn out, with nothing to bore her."

"You flatter yourself I should not be bored?" she said saucily, — too saucily, for he winced.

"I don't venture to believe you are in love with me," said he with a shrug.

"I should rather think not."

"What I wonder is, whether you are in love with any other man."

"Of course I am not in love with any other man. It is not my *métier* to be in love. I could act it, I could sing it, but nothing would induce me to feel it."

"Not in love with any one at all?"

"A little with Mrs. Lee Childe, who is the most charming person I ever met."

"But with no man?"

"With no man."

"Your heart never felt a throb?"

"It is a piece of crystal glass which beats here," she said, putting her hand on her heart.

"Fancy me in love with a perfectly heartless girl," said Poorshaw. "Just fancy!"

XI.

THE release which a new hope gives a man from the trammels of the ordinary had been an interesting phenomenon to Mr. Rutherford Childe, who had for many years lacked any fresh inspiration, and had lived chiefly by routine. The unreasonable, unaccountable persistence of the ideal in a mind which has long since discarded ideals surprised him. At times he was ready to accuse Milly of cruelty, for having spoiled his peace of mind; then he forgave her, confessing that this suggestion of a second marriage offered him something to think about, and, in certain moments, took on hues of rose color, and lent a strange glamour to existence. Had he originated the idea it could never have enjoyed the lease of life he now granted it, out of concession to Milly. Had he first confessed to his own heart that he wished to marry Mrs. Fletcher, examined his own feelings and probed for hers, he would have blushed at his own absurdity. A man of sixty-six amorous and inclined to experiment on the reciprocal sentiment of a widow a few years his junior! The thing would have been preposterous. But the responsibility was Milly's, and she possessed plenty of feminine acuteness. She read the situation with insight and sympathy, saw that here were two elderly peo-

ple each of whom needed the other. What could be simpler! It would be such a comfortable arrangement. It is true that hitherto his definition of matrimony had not been a comfortable arrangement; quite the contrary, for his experience had left a sort of prejudice in his mind. He had not been, so to say, unhappy with the late Mrs. Childe, who was a masterful spirit, born for supremacy, because he had afforded her little opportunity to meddle with him. At the first intimation of such officious interposition he had remarked, "Too much —— interference!" and had set off for Egypt.

What Milly ought to have done after recklessly throwing this projectile into his still inflammable heart, was to have proceeded to do the same with Mrs. Fletcher. In fact he had counted on such good services. Then, after creating a simultaneous explosion, she could have joined the two hands and otherwise have arranged and simplified matters.

But it soon became evident that his daughter-in-law had spoken without mature deliberation, throwing off the suggestion at a white heat of energy when the most marvelous accidents in life seemed easy. Of late she had been in a quieter mood, talked less and brooded a good deal. She did not, of her own accord, again bring up the subject, but when he himself alluded to it, she gave one of her crisp nods and bright smiles, and said, "Why don't you?" evidently expecting him to act for himself.

It was a ponderous combustible for a quiet man to carry about without any one to share the burden

with him. What a pity that he and Mrs. Fletcher, used as they were to discussing all sorts of subjects together, could not talk this over, looking at it objectively, subjectively, from an interested and from a disinterested standpoint, and decide whether it was or was not feasible.

These problems assailed him. He was a man in his sixty-sixth year; now how does a man of sixty-five years and eight months strike a woman's perceptions?

He had no money in particular, but Milly had long since told him he need never think twice about that matter, as he was certain of always finding an ample balance at his banker's. Mrs. Fletcher was fairly well off, so financially there was no painful discrepancy in their circumstances.

What would she say to it?

What would her children, nephews, and nieces say?

What would people in general say?

Where would she wish him to live? In her own house, on Gramercy Park, or in his, — that is, Milly's? His daughter-in-law had paid the heavy mortgage on the Childe property at the time of her marriage, and her trustees held the title-deeds.

He himself would prefer to make no changes at his time of life. Still, marriage is inevitably an upheaval; alas, there lay the danger! He had a flitting insight as to the untamed, original elements a woman brings into a man's life. But then again, his gallant youthful spirit revived, and he courted

them. At times he even felt refreshingly stimulated by the idea of them.

He took advantage of one of these more hopeful intervals, and one snowy morning went to see Mrs. Fletcher. There was nothing out of the common in this, for it had been his habit to go constantly to see Mrs. Fletcher before he was under the weight of this turbulent secret of which he longed to be delivered.

She was in her usual place before the fire when he entered, in her comfortable armchair, flanked by two low tables holding books, papers, periodicals, wool-work, indeed, every appliance favorable to pleasant occupation, yet she was sitting with her pretty hands folded in her lap.

"Oh, cousin Rutherford," she exclaimed, "I am delighted to see you. I was thinking about you."

"Thinking about me?" said Mr. Childe, almost with a qualm. Perhaps, after all, Milly had forestalled him. He was holding her hand, and for a moment had the impulse to kiss it, then was conscious of fumbling, so waited for an occasion when he could be more swift and direct. "And what were you thinking?" he asked.

"I have thought more than once of late," said Mrs. Fletcher, "that you were not well. You look to me rather feverish."

He sat down opposite her with an air of relief.

"I was apprehensive about the adjective," he remarked; "you might have said old."

"Oh dear, no," said Mrs. Fletcher, "I never

think of you as old." She smiled at him so brightly he felt dazzled.

"I am not feverish," said he. "That is, I eat and sleep as usual. I am too much alone, I suppose. I think too much."

"One is apt to try to look too far into things," responded Mrs. Fletcher. "Now when I find myself trying to settle the affairs of the universe I say to myself 'After all, they have got on without me for some five or six thousand years,' — so I give it up."

"I don't know," said Mr. Childe reluctantly. He had sat down almost in front of her in the cozy corner by the fireplace.

"That is too low for you," said Mrs. Fletcher.

"Not at all, — suits me very well," he returned.

"Put your legs up, — lean back, — there, let me arrange the cushions behind you, so. That is better," said Mrs. Fletcher, — "that is more comfortable, is it not?"

"Too comfortable," said Mr. Childe. "You spoil an old fellow."

"I want to spoil him. I 'm so delighted to see you. I am to have some cold birds for lunch, — Aggy sent them. I wanted somebody to enjoy them with me."

"You and I have known each other a long time, Agnes."

She nodded at him kindly, and he proceeded, "When we reflect upon what we saw together in our youth, what the world was then, and what it

has come to, — how when we were young certain ideas were inculcated " —

He paused a moment, losing the thread of his discourse.

" Yes," she acquiesced cheerfully, " I often think of it."

" It really does seem to me," he went on, " that you and I are the sole survivors of a better generation."

" Dear me, we are not the oldest inhabitants yet," exclaimed Mrs. Fletcher.

" But everybody else has forgotten. When I wish to say to any one ' Do you remember ? ' I turn to you."

" Exactly. Just so when a recollection floats up to my mind, I say to myself, ' I must tell cousin Rutherford.' "

" Now don't you see," said Mr. Childe, " there is a peculiar affinity, — a secret link between us ? " He had changed his position. " Press a button, as it were, and it touches the same spring of old feelings and memories in each of us."

" That exactly expresses it."

" Don't you think, Agnes," asked Mr. Childe in a wheedling manner and slipping along the length of the seat towards her, " that it gives us a sort of duty in the matter ? "

" A duty ? " repeated Mrs. Fletcher, as if puzzled.

" Don't you see that the thing two people ought to do under the circumstances is to get married ? "

"Whom do you mean?"

"You and I."

"You and I get married?"

"Yes, Agnes Fletcher, you and I get married."

"Rutherford Childe, in all my life I never heard anything so ridiculous."

Mrs. Fletcher's soft serenity of aspect had changed, a bright spot appeared on each cheek, her eyes were dilated, and her lips formed a round O of astonishment.

"Come now," said Mr. Childe, "I don't see anything ridiculous in it. If ever a man tried all his life long to avoid making himself absurd, it is I. I confess it startled me when it was first suggested."

"Who on earth suggested such a thing?"

"Milly."

"She must have been joking."

"Not a bit of it. She said there was just one person in the world I longed always to see, to whom I loved to talk; in listening to whom I delighted, — who in fact made my little happy world inside of the great brutal outside world, and so why should I not try to marry her?"

"Ah, I see. I knew it could never have been your own idea."

"Indeed it was my own idea, — it had been floating over me all the time, only, as it were, I had not grasped it. Milly caught it and put it in my head."

"A bee in your bonnet, — yes, that describes it."

"It is the most natural thing in the world. The moment she suggested it I realized that the thing had actually been going on these forty years. I remember the night you came out. I sent you some flowers. I was twenty-five then."

"I was eighteen."

"You wore a white gown, — I remember the slippers you had on, so slender, so pretty, with large rosettes."

"Good gracious! I thought you a finished man of the world. I considered it immense condescension when you asked me to dance."

"Your blush was charming. If you had not gone and got yourself engaged in two months our fates might have been very different. I think you owe me some reparation. I will give you a chance. Say that you will marry me, Agnes."

"Nonsense! Now, at the eleventh hour? Nothing would induce me," said Mrs. Fletcher.

"I suppose you consider me too old. I assure you I intend to live until I am ninety. However, perhaps it is better not to offer that circumstance as an inducement. There are accidents, you know. I may pop off the hooks at any time."

"I 'm much obliged. I certainly wish you to live as long as possible, but I don't think of changing my condition," retorted Mrs. Fletcher. "I have grandchildren old enough to laugh at me."

"Don't think of those trivial considerations; think of me. Besides, we would have a delightful house for them to come to, — you can give them a

grandfather. They do nothing for you. You are lonely here."

"I am not lonely at all."

"You often tell me you are lonely."

"A woman says things" —

"For example that she wants me to eat a cold bird with her while all the time she actually begrudges it."

"I don't mind your having all the birds, cousin Rutherford" —

He caught her hand which she extended in airy gesture.

"Don't you like me?" he demanded.

"When you are sensible."

He kissed her hand with his best air, then relinquished it. He rose, and stood with his back to the fire.

"You are too sensible," he said dryly. "I am happy to say I am capable of a few follies yet, old fellow that I am, — if being in love with the most charming woman I have ever known is a folly. However, I suppose Milly is still left me. I 'll go home and tell her she made a mistake."

"I am glad to see you are coming to your senses," said Mrs. Fletcher with a bright little nod. "And if Milly can console you, you are not broken-hearted."

"Broken-hearted! I don't take expressions out of phrase-books. I thank Heaven for Milly. I don't suppose I ought to expect anything better than she can give me." A clear note of submis-

sion to the inevitable was beginning to be heard in his voice. Perhaps it touched sensibilities in Mrs. Fletcher hitherto unstirred.

"Do sit down, cousin Rutherford," she said entreatingly. "It afflicts me to see you standing in that uncomfortable way."

"Thanks, but I am on the point of going."

"I can't let you go away angry with me. Quarreling between you and me is quite out of the question."

"I have no wish to quarrel, — you must confess that my intentions ran in a very different direction. But when a man is laughed at, his views derided" —

"You took away my breath. Never in all my life was I so overwhelmed with surprise."

"Well, perhaps it was an absurd proposition."

"I did not actually intend to say it was an absurd proposition," said Mrs. Fletcher; "but I was startled. It takes one a moment to recover from such a shock. Then, gradually the aspect of the thing changes. One grasps the total idea."

"I know," said Mr. Childe mournfully. "I went through all that when Milly broached the subject. Well, let 's forget it all."

"Oh, so you were not really in earnest about the matter?"

"No particular use for a man to be in earnest all by himself, — it needs two earnest people in order to get married."

"I do not believe you are at all broken-hearted," observed Mrs. Fletcher.

"I should hope not. As our time on earth shortens, we are more and more anxious to dismiss fallacies and accept facts. The fact proves to be that you won't have me, Agnes; so I avenge myself on fortune by becoming a philosopher."

"Do sit down," said Mrs. Fletcher nervously. "I can't help thinking that you are angry with me."

He yielded to her entreaties and sat down. There was nothing implacable in his mood. Certainly, he reflected, a second marriage was no necessity of life for a man, — it offered no particular distinction, nor could it be said to be an infallible distraction to the troubles of life.

"I tell you, I 'm not angry," said he. "Of course I 'm vexed that I made the offer. It will be a disturbing element. You will always be thinking what an old fool I was" —

"I shall never think such a thing," said Mrs. Fletcher. He had seated himself once more in the fireplace corner, and she went up to him with a cushion. "Here, let me put this behind you."

"Do you mean that all can go on in the good old fashion?" he said, looking at the wonderful softness of her eyes and bloom of her face. "Do you promise to forget all about it?"

"I don't want to forget it. Are you comfortable?"

"Delightfully comfortable."

"Put your feet up, — there, lean back."

"You are a charming woman, Agnes," —

"I can see that you are glad you are out of the mess."

"It would have been a pudding indeed, if all had come about as I proposed."

"Rutherford Childe, I do believe you are actually heartless."

"Heartless?" He started up. He caught her hand. "By Jove, Agnes," said he, "are those tears in your eyes? Heartless? I, heartless, — when I can't live without you? When, if you will not grant me the first place, I am ready to take any? When I have grown so used to the idea of loving you, of being loved by you, that I" —

"Rutherford Childe," whispered Mrs. Fletcher between laughing and crying, "it *is* the most ridiculous thing I ever heard of in my life."

Lunch was announced, and they went out together and ate the cold birds. A peculiar hilarity was evident in Mr. Childe, while Mrs. Fletcher seemed to be afraid to lift her eyes.

XII.

Mrs. Lee Childe had not seen Sidney Breck for some weeks, in fact had definitely made up her mind she could never see him again, when one evening at a private view of some paintings by American artists, as she entered the main gallery, she caught a glimpse of him making the rounds with his hand on Holly Ruff's arm. Her heart gave a great beat; for a moment she longed to run away, then all at once the conviction came over her that it was important, even essential, that she should speak to him that evening. She was in advance of her party, and now, rather uncomfortably and against the current, led them to the left.

"I suppose you will buy something, Milly," Miss Hurst remarked. "This is pretty; I hope you will choose this."

"I have no idea what I shall buy," replied Milly.

"There is Mr. Ruff. Let us try to reach him," said Miss Hurst. "He understands these things and will give us some ideas."

"That sort of man generally knows too much," said Mr. Ferris. "I hate to have to look intelligent while people talk a high-art jargon."

"When Mr. Ruff talks," observed Milly, "I

always creep as close as I can hoping to pick up something."

Her ruse was successful in the present instance. By keeping close to the rail with a pertinacity worthy of a more just cause, indeed aided by the very people she most inconvenienced, since they recognized her as a possible purchaser of the pictures they looked at with the most purely disinterested admiration, she was by this time close beside Holly Ruff, who, with a shrug and shake of the head, was standing erect before a medium-sized canvas, which Breck, bending forward, was studying eagerly.

"Times were," Ruff was saying, "that when the brains were out the man would die. Nowadays their loss seems to add a lease of life to poets, novelists, even painters."

"The tints may want cooking together," put in Breck, "but just as a delicate bit of color—"

"Nonsense; you see paint, not a picture. I hate that talk. X—— ought to have a lesson. He can do good work, but he has decided good work does not pay, so he does bad work."

"Evidently," said Mrs. Lee Childe in his ear, "you came to bury Cæsar, not to praise him."

Breck had already with a start recognized her, and had plucked at his companion's arm. It was Ruff who flushed most deeply as Milly gave her hand to each and introduced them to those of her party to whom they were not known.

"It is Breck who knows most about it," said

Holly Ruff, with an access of modesty as he saw himself surrounded by listeners. "To be a judge of pictures one must have used colors and a brush."

"I don't see that," said Mr. Ferris. "A man need not be a baker to know whether bread is good or bad."

"A baker can tell whether there is alum in it."

"I remember taking a clever pianist to hear Z——," said Milly. "The music was exquisite, but my friend could not get over the fact that Z—— used his first finger when he should have used his third. I cared nothing whether he used fingers or thumbs, — not I, so long as the sound charmed me."

"I tell Breck he thinks about the way the thing is produced, not the sum total of its effect. I insist that in the arts technique is not all, although it is" —

Breck's eyes and Milly's had encountered with an indescribable glance.

"There is a picture I wished to ask you about," she said.

"A picture?" he repeated.

"What do you think of the exhibition, Mr. Ruff?" inquired Miss Hurst. "But perhaps you prefer to reserve your opinions for a printed article."

"I am ready and willing to impart my opinion to the whole world," said Ruff. "It is a very pretty exhibition. It shows the characteristic ten-

dencies of the day. There are few important works, and the most ambitious disclose little significance or originality. Nobody seems actually to have anything to say, but tries to say nothing in the neatest possible manner. Since painters will not see for themselves nor feel for themselves, there is one advantage in following French models, for the French, even when they have nothing to say, possess the knack of saying nothing with surprising *chic*."

Ruff, embarrassed, constrained, tied by the leg, as it were, could not but be flattered by the air of rapt attention with which some of the party listened to this disquisition, and he did not at first perceive that his audience had lessened by two. Meanwhile, Mrs. Childe had moved on, and Breck, with a slight frown, had followed.

"Are you exhibiting anything?" she inquired.

"Oh, no, — that is, — there is a design for" —

"Will you not show it to me?" She glanced back at him over her shoulder, and smiled.

"It is not worth looking at," he replied. "You spoke of a picture."

"Oh, yes, — a picture. I must have your advice."

"Ruff says the worst things please me; that I see high merit in the most pitiful good intentions. I dare say he is right. I think too much of the long months' work of men who ache for a little understanding and sympathy. I dare say if I were in the *concours* I should be more critical and less sympathetic."

"Could we not sit down somewhere?" said Milly, her eyes fixed on his face. "I wished to speak about something, — not the pictures."

"There is a bench in the little room where the plaster casts are," suggested Breck. He led the way, and they found a place deserted by the crowd. She sat down at once; he stood before her and looked expectantly at her.

"I wanted to speak to you about Miss Rivera," she said, looking back at him with absolute serenity.

He dropped his eyes.

"Anita told me of your visit," he said. "I can hardly express my sense of your kindness, Mrs. Childe."

"Do you mean about the musicale? There is no kindness in that enterprise. It is she who does me a great favor. I wanted to ask your consent."

"My consent?" He smiled.

"She confided to me that it was your wish that she should give up singing."

"I have no desire that she should give up anything that makes her happier; all I wish is to spare her disappointment and disenchantment."

"She has a charming voice. She has every right to be successful. Think what it would be to stifle such a talent. You yourself know what it is to live half submerged, as it were" —

"I?" — repeated Breck, as if puzzled — "I live half submerged?"

"She is so young," pursued Milly, as if pleading

for a cause on which all her heart was set. "Let her have the chance. Even if she were to fail let her have had the chance. You will in the end lose nothing."

"I evidently figure to you as a monster," he said, — "a monster of egoistic selfishness."

"A man has a right to be selfish towards the woman he loves," pursued Milly. "He wants his wife for his own fireside."

"You see me on the domestic hearth playing the part of tyrant, repressing artistic instincts, discussing the price of butter and eggs, and insisting that the coal bills shall be cut down."

Their eyes met, and both laughed.

"Fools rush in," said Milly, with a little gesture indicative of going no farther. "I will trust you to do exactly what you think best."

"No man knows what a bore he can be until he becomes a *père de famille*," said Breck. "But actually my only wish at present is to spare Anita pain. I am afraid hers is only a half talent. She has not worked long enough or hard enough. She has tried to snatch at one success after another. It is bad for a man to be *raté*, but for a woman it is brutal."

"She is so beautiful," said Milly.

"Is she not?" He laughed as he spoke. "I tell her it is enough for her to be a pretty woman, — that that after all is the rarest gift. But she retorts that whereas as an artist she might be easily satisfied, as a pretty woman her wishes are illimi-

table, — that nobody except a millionaire could begin to satisfy her just demands." He was flushed, and his eyes were too bright, but a suggestion of humor in his manner took away any suspicions of serious criticism from his words. "She is so fond of pretty things. She loves profusion. A flower is not enough, she insists on having a whole greenhouse of flowers. One new gown shows her the limitations of her wardrobe; if she requires one she requires twenty. A single jewel is nothing; her taste in jewels is regal."

"I advise you," said Milly, with a little nod, "to encourage her devotion to art. Why is she not here to-night?"

"Geddes Poorshaw has a small theatre party for Anita, Mrs. Hugh Rivera, and another sister and her daughter, who are visiting them. I was to have joined them, but Anita confided to me that my ticket could be used with singular advantage by a young man who is devoted to the pretty young niece; accordingly, I am here."

As he said these four words, a mask seemed to drop from his face. "I am so glad to see you," he added, under his breath. "I have" — Some secret emotion seemed to have taken possession of him, and it communicated itself to her. She could no longer look at him, but he kept a straight, strong, compelling gaze upon her.

"I am glad to see you," she murmured, as he broke off.

"Oh, thank you, thank you," he said fer-

vently. "I have felt cast out in utter darkness. I ought not to say this, but I will, — I must say it. After I had gone away that night, I did not go far; I walked up and down, — up and down. I had but one idea."

What that idea was — that she had confessed her love for a man who had already rejected her for another woman — burned in afresh upon her consciousness, but she kept a half smile upon her lips, and said nothing.

"You had told me to go away," he went on, "and at the moment implicit obedience to you seemed my highest law; but, the chance gone, I realized what I had lost by my cowardice. I despised myself — I, a man, and had left you! A dog, a dumb brute, would have stayed!"

The color flashed to her face; she mistook his meaning for his possible meaning.

"Sit down," she said nervously; for he had not once changed his position, but had continued to stand before her, bending forward, so that their faces were about on a level. She moved slightly, lifting the wrap she carried, changing it from one arm to the other. "One may as well take a little comfort if one has the chance," she remarked easily.

"Oh, comfort, comfort!" he repeated ironically.

"Besides, I have something to say to you which calls for a little heroism," she proceeded; "and for a moment I wish not to be under your eyes."

She laughed as she spoke. He seated himself beside her, and gazed straight in front, and did not once turn towards her.

"I have never had a friend in my life," she said, "and you see, Mr. Breck, I had hoped we were to be real, actual friends. When you fell away, I was sorely hurt. I wanted to explain, but a woman — at least, a young woman — cannot explain. She says too much; the right words do not fit themselves to her demands; and, carried away by the feeling of the moment, she uses abrupt, obscure expressions, which stand for what" —

"Oh, my God!" muttered Breck. "I cannot have you accuse yourself, — explain anything away. Let me go on remembering that once one of God's angels came down and looked in my face."

"I was going to ask you to forget it," said Milly.

"Anything else."

"Well, well; I feel sure at least you wish me no ill, so I can forget it. Let us be friends, Mr. Breck, — real friends."

"You honor me. I certainly am your friend."

"Your marriage will not hinder our friendship; quite the reverse. She is charming. I think, in all my life, I never saw a girl who interested me so much. She is almost the more charming because, unlike everyday girls, she does not put all her romance into her little per-

sonal vanities and ambitions; she gives it to her music."

"She is clever, but crude; she is still uncertain of her vocation; she does not know where her real talent lies."

"Oh, certainly in music," said Milly with energy.

"Evidently, you heard her on a good day. The unlucky thing is, she cannot count on her good days. It is partly because she does not realize the sacrifices one has to make for a talent before it gives one complete happiness, and partly because she is too ardent, too excitable, and permits herself to be upset by trifles. When she told me of your wish, I said, 'But, Anita, suppose you should disappoint Mrs. Childe.' And she shuddered, realizing that there was always that hideous possibility of gathering herself up for the high note, which is the climax of the song, and failing to strike it."

"She will strike it, — strike it to everybody's enchantment," said Milly, almost at a loss to find reason for Breck's disbelief in powers which had seemed to her so rare and so perfected. "You do not refuse to let her sing at my musicale, Mr. Breck?"

"I refuse? No, indeed; she shall do as she chooses."

"At present, at all events," said Milly, with a little, soft laugh.

"I am perfectly willing, for her own sake, that

she should experience the grand and final test," said he. "It is a good thing for any human being to get at the pith and kernel of hard fact."

"I see," returned Milly, still laughing, "that you wish to clip her wings. I feel for you, but let her sing just this once or twice. Let her see what gratified ambition is, and perhaps even her success will show her, better than defeat could, that for a woman there is but one art, — the art of loving. She has a rich nature, and when the time comes all will be subordinate to that. Do not thwart her. When she knows life better, she will understand that her loss is a gain, — that what you will offer is more than a fair exchange."

Still Breck looked in front.

"I wanted to say this," she added, with evident effort.

"Thanks," he replied stiffly.

She sat for a moment playing with the fringe of her mantle, perhaps in doubt whether she had made her meaning clear. Then it occurred to her that she had on one occasion made it too clear, and she made haste to rise.

"I hope you will come to the musicale, Mr. Breck," she said. He, too, had risen.

"I do not attend musicales," he replied in a manner which would have seemed cold and dull, had she not remembered his kindled face a few moments before.

"Oh, you will come to this," she said, with persistent hopefulness. "We must go back to my party; they will think that I have been buying a picture, — that I have bought a whole gallery of pictures. There is poor Mr. Ruff still discoursing on art. A regular Casabianca! He must be longing for some catastrophe to end his ordeal."

XIII.

MRS. LEE CHILDE,
AT HOME,
On Saturday, February the Twenty-fourth.
Music at Four o'clock.
STUYVESANT SQUARE.

THIS invitation flew about New York within three days, and it was understood that it heralded the introduction of a singer, young, beautiful, and unique in gifts. Paragraphs in the papers proclaimed her to be a Malibran, a Garcia. Reporters called upon Miss Rivera; one solicited her photograph, and it was reproduced, in a style which flattered only by its polite intentions, in a Sunday paper. Anita herself was happy in this interval. Her scale of possibilities no longer seemed incomplete, but sounded each note to its full power and sweetness. Her new gown had come home, and was exquisite; Mrs. Hugh Rivera went on her knees before it. Mrs. Lee Childe was friendly, intimate, caressing, and carried the young girl off day after day into a world all rose and azure tinted. Sidney Breck was acquiescent. Geddes Poorshaw, a little abashed, was holding himself aloof, but perhaps gathering up his forces for a final blow. The ball seemed at the feet of Anita, who, in her moments of highest rapture,

had a practical sense of the advantages of her present position.

Signor Contarini, it is true, kept her hard at work, growing less and less willing that she should spare labor or slur over any difficulty. He came to her each day in a terrible state of mind, predicting evil, putting his fingers in her ears at the first note she sounded; compelling her to stop and listen to an exordium, then, pouncing upon her the moment her voice died away on the final note, and, as it were, tearing to pieces any belief in her own performance. Not, he explained, that he wished to discourage her; it was only that he wished to enforce submission upon her. The spirit of obedience must be put into every note of her music; she must open her mouth with an awful sense of the necessity of producing her tones in a way to throw its exact duties upon each distinct organ concerned. She must clearly understand that she rested, not upon her own powers, but upon his guidance, and that the more wholly she trusted to him the more gloriously she would sing. Then, intrenched in sure knowledge and strength, she might find her forces pliant to opportunity, and reach forth to some other end than that of attaining mere dull correctness. Yet this liberty was to be sparingly exercised, and always under a solemn sense of special consecration. He mistrusted her possible belief in herself.

"Will that do?" she would ask him day by day.

"Yaas, yaas," he sometimes replied. "That

will do. I wish all the connoisseurs in New York could hear you."

But twenty-four hours later it was apt to be, —

"Do? That will never do. It was bad. It was abominable! It was incredible!"

"Oh, Mr. Contarini," Anita once exclaimed in keen disappointment, for she had believed she had executed something vivid, effective, thrilling, "you are cruel."

"Cruel? cruel?" he returned. "It is you, Miss Rivera, who are cruel. It is to you I hold out my hand for bread and you give me — a stone. It is you whom I have warmed at my fire who turn into a viper and sting me. I come to hear a nightingale, and what is it I am obliged to listen to? An owl, — an owl that hoots."

"That is more than cruel, — it is unjust," Anita declared with flashing eyes. "It may be I have taken a slight cold" —

"If you are to be a singer you must not take a slight cold. Where did you go last night?"

"To the opera."

"Ah, yes, to the German opera. That is the place to learn to screech, to sing like a trumpet, to strain the voice till it is no voice at all, but a tin pan. You know I have forbidden you the German opera till you know how you ought not to sing."

"I wanted to go once," said Anita. "Mr. Poorshaw offered Maddy a box" —

"And afterwards? You ate ices, no doubt, — ices at midnight. Is that the way to treat a voice?

Is an art, a sacred, a divine art, to be played with like a toy, put on or off like a garment, treated like a lover with whom you act the coquette, — are good to to-day, turn your back on to-morrow? No, it demands the complete giving up. You say you want a great success at Mrs. Childe's, yet you let your mind go this way and that. To be anybody, to be anything, you must be sincere, you must be thorough, you must be narrow. You think of too many things."

"If I had only the one idea of my voice, and particularly after you scold me, Mr. Contarini, how could I summon any strength or spirit to sing at all?"

"If you wish to be a great singer you must think of one thing, and of one thing alone."

"You like to discourage me," said Anita, the tears starting to her eyes.

"Ah, no tears! *Les larmes dans la voix* come not when you are weeping, but when you are complete mistress of yourself. Now we will try once more. Remember that we have ears, nerves, a brain; that we know a voice from a trumpet through the nose."

To hold one's own against criticism so pointed, so personal, requires, it must be confessed, not only good nerves, but a singleness of purpose which cleaves to its object like a limpet to its rock. And how could a girl like Anita be wholly under the domination of one meagre idea? How could she dare so to surrender herself, to fasten to anything

with the very fibre of her soul, to feel with the very palpitations of her life? There were so many voices in her ears, so many hands held out. And it was so essential to choose the very best, and not dwindle away into insignificance from missing her opportunity. In such a crisis, individual taste and personal craving should, she argued, count for little.

Certainly she liked Sidney Breck, and liked him, too, with what she recognized as the better, nobler, wiser, part of herself. He was a bright, sincere, honorable fellow, and having asked her to marry him, and not having been refused, came regularly every night to see her, brought her books, talked quietly and rationally about her music, helped her all he could, and seemed always to keep the fact clearly in his mind that they two were to spend the rest of their lives together. What he was now she could be certain he would always be, when the husband had outlived the lover. While she was with him their engagement seemed easy, natural, charming, and the hindrances she imposed were of the sort most provocative to an ardent young fellow, who seemed incapable of believing that a girl who confessed she loved him could be in earnest about her individual cravings and ambitions.

"How little he knows me!" Anita would say to herself, when she rose next morning, the glamour Breck's presence had brought wholly departed. It was by the clear light of day that Poorshaw had

his triumph. To begin with, the morning brought his daily offering of flowers; then, a little later, he came. Anita never said to herself that this man pleased her, yet he somehow encouraged and stimulated her, for the reason, perhaps, that he looked at life from a widely different standpoint from that of Breck, whom nothing contented but the pith of the substance. Poorshaw was not only superficial and narrow-minded, but he piqued himself upon being superficial and narrow-minded, half despising people for looking too far into things.

Anita had often said to herself that Poorshaw was hard and that he could be brutal, but insensibly she began to like his easy way of following certain estimates and understandings taken for granted by people who accept the world as a place offered for their enjoyment. Not but that she still maintained her artistic ambitions, but she had begun to realize that when a woman sets out to be more beautiful and to have more luxurious houses and carriages than her neighbors, the result may be somewhat in proportion to her endeavors, but that when she enters the domain of art, she conquers or is beaten, just as it happens. This wavering uncertainty, whether she was or was not to witch the world with her singing, at times began to seem, as Poorshaw declared, not worth the candle. And by way of paradox, Mrs. Lee Childe's influence was thrown into the scale on the side of Poorshaw's suggestions and promises, for Anita, in preparing for the musicale, went every day to Milly's

house, in Milly's carriage, and was waited upon by Milly's servants. She liked the splendors and refinements with which she now became familiar. "I call that ease in high life," was Mrs. Hugh Rivera's admiring comment upon her own occasional glimpses of Mrs. Lee Childe and her belongings, and there was a secret exultation in Anita's eager little heart at the conviction that this luxury, this "ease in high life," came easily to her.

She told Sidney Breck this when he came on the evening of the twenty-third, and he laughed at her, declaring that there was not a shop-girl in New Yórk who did not feel that nature intended her to tread on Eastern rugs and ride in carriages.

"A good honest taste for bread without butter, and for walking on one's two honest feet, shows far more originality," he added. "Wait until you have been my wife for a year, the sharer of my two rooms" —

"Oh, even you are growing luxurious! There are to be two rooms, not one."

"Yes, my two rooms; the cooker of my porridge, the" —

"Don't be too sure."

"Anita, do you know how to make a salad?"

"It is not my *métier* to know how to make a salad. My business is to sing."

"Alas, I wish it were to-morrow night and all well. Not that I care a button about your being successful; but it kills me to think of your failing again, although I admit" —

"Well, what do you admit?"

"That if you suffer a regular Humpty Dumpty fall my course will be clearer. I may then assert myself. I shall put on my boots and spurs and take my riding-whip in hand. I blame myself for dawdling, but then with a debatable egg, of which nobody can tell whether it is to hatch into nightingale or — blackbird" —

"I am much obliged to you for not saying a crow."

"I have not liked to make the little final arrangements. I don't say what will happen if you have a great success, Anita, but if you do not" —

"You evidently count with assurance on my failure."

"No, I do not. But if you should by any chance happen to fail, I shall say, 'Anita, marry me in two weeks.'"

He could not have said all this had he not felt sure of touching a vibrating, responsive chord in her; Anita was neither cold nor dull, and Breck charmed her. She glowed like a gem as he talked to her; she looked back at him laughing and dimpling, every glance a caress. He went away under the glamour left by his final clasp of her light, pretty figure. She was to be his girl-wife, and his heart throbbed.

"At least she loves me," he said to himself, "and she shall never find out that I do not completely love her. At least, I will be true to her."

He was often enough angrily indignant with

himself for not dismissing every other thought and accepting the happiness Anita could give him. "Happiness, happiness," he to-night said moodily to himself, "why should I think about happiness?" He counted over on his fingers the men he knew, to discover if any one of them was ideally happy, that is, romantically happy. The only men who were satisfied with their lot were those who were so hard driven by daily work that they saw no problems in life except how to get through with their endless task. Holly Ruff was happy in a way, because he used all his powers.

"I shall need to work," Breck said to himself, putting his hands into his pockets. "Anita will want all the money I can earn, and likely enough I too shall be happy." That is, he meant that, goaded on, he should finally forget his present ceaseless, impetuous, impotent longing, his intense thirst after the happiness he refused to believe in.

Anita went to bed almost ready to starve, feast, despair, and be happy with Breck, whom she saw in the most attractive colors, and it was as if Poorshaw did not exist for her. But next morning, when she awoke, the illusions which had governed her the night before fell off like dead leaves; she re-awoke to the real facts of life, for this was the day of days. A woman cannot think of everything at once. She smiled with half amusement to-day to reflect how dear she was to Breck, how ardently he longed to have his ordeal ended. There is a fatality about such a love,—

it was too ideal, she said to herself, thinking of her actual requisites of life. She was glad that he was not to be at the musicale, and when at ten o'clock she received a message from him saying that he was called to Washington by the senior partner, she breathed, as it were, more freely. She could hardly have described in what way he hindered her free play, but of late she had at times felt hurried, crowded, an actress of too many parts.

Milly Childe herself came for Anita at one o'clock.

"How is the voice?" she asked anxiously.

"Mr. Contarini was here. I sang the exercises to him, and he was satisfied," said Anita. "He told me not to think about my voice again to-day."

Milly was in high spirits, or seemed so. She talked all the way to her house, whither she was taking Anita to dress and to rest, telling her amusing things, delicately tickling her vanity with flatteries, helping, in fact, to inflate the balloon which was to soar up into a region of flame and azure a few hours later. Anita listened, her heart throbbing. She liked the excitement, yet was conscious that her nerves were thrilling from her intense mental action.

"If I were only made of gutta-percha," she said as Milly was leaving her after showing her about the rooms, where magnificent tropical plants and exotics were piled high in all the corners.

Milly put her arms round the girl and kissed her. "It is going to be a great success," she said.

"But after all what is success to you? It is wholly an outside thing. You are yourself and will continue to be yourself, and Sidney Breck cares only for your actual self, and if you should not sing your best he will but love you the more dearly."

"He said last night," said Anita, between laughing and crying, "that if I covered myself with glory he should probably hide his face dazzled by my grandeur, but that if I failed he should insist on my marrying him in two weeks."

"And do you want to marry him in two weeks, or do you wish to succeed?"

"Do you ask?" demanded Anita, wondering at the sudden flash on Milly's face. "I would not marry him in two weeks, in two months, in two years. That is what I feel to-day. I shall end by running away to the other side of the world, away from him, for he governs me, coerces me, makes me seem to like what actually I hate."

"I do not like to think my musicale is to be a destiny, a fate, a providence," said Milly. She looked at the girl with a bright penetrating glance. She would have added something which burned in her heart and almost trembled on her tongue, then remembered that Anita was to rest, to dress herself composedly, and be ready by four o'clock. So once more she kissed her, and then shut the door on her.

Anita had no desire to rest.

"It is indeed a destiny, a fate, a providence,"

she said to herself. She moved up and down the room conscious of a growing intoxication, yet not knowing how to repress it. Currents of diverse thoughts and feelings met within her, and she felt herself reckless of results.

"After all," she said almost audibly, "somebody's heart must be broken. I suppose since the beginning of the world a girl has always had two lovers at once, and chosen one." She walked to the mirror and looked in at the lovely reflection. "Which?" she said, questioning the soft ovals of the beautiful face, the delicate bloom, the laughing lips and eyes. "Do I love one better than the other? At this moment I love nobody; I am in love with myself."

She bent forward in an attitude which showed her herself in another mirror at a right angle. How pretty her side face was, how becoming the twist and knot of her hair! She turned her neck first one way, then the other, and her beautiful dark eyes burned like those of Calderon's Spanish women. Her gown was laid out on the bed, and with a cry of delighted recognition she ran towards the pale blue crêpe, with its neck and sleeves of white chiffon. She longed to see herself in it; — she glanced at the little clock, — there were twenty minutes yet before she needed to begin dressing. A white *peignoir* lay across the lounge where she was expected to lie down for half an hour. She had no inclination for rest, but put on the *peignoir* in order to feel herself into harmony with the deli-

cate tints of the room, where there was a careful choice displayed even in the placing of a satin bow on a cushion. After all, this was the actual poetry of life, she reflected; in fact, one might say the art best worth having, that of living well with every possible appurtenance that can lend charm and completeness. And the comfort of it was that such poetry and such high art were easily attainable to anybody who had, say twenty-five thousand a year, — from that upwards. No thrill of uncertainty, no possibility of failure, when the supreme point aimed at is to live in the handsomest way, — if only one has money to pay the bills.

A pang darted through the momentary enchantment.

"I hope I am not going to be nervous," she said to herself, for her heart had leaped into her throat as the recollection returned that in an hour she would be called to sing before a crowd of people. For a moment the ordeal seemed terrible as she thought of going forward, every eye fastened upon her. She was ready to weep. A sudden feeling of loneliness, of confused wishes and regrets came over her; a profound envy of the luckier people to whom the prizes of life were awarded without struggle or competition.

"Am I turning out a coward?" she said to herself, for hitherto she had rejoiced at the task of forcing the world by dint of hard knocks to give her what she wanted.

A rap came at the door. A maid brought a

glass of *eau sucrée*, and asked if she could serve Miss Rivera in any way. No, Miss Rivera wanted nothing save the *eau sucrée*, which she drank thirstily. The draught brought back her courage. She was no longer flushed, but pale. The blood was no longer at her head; she had quieted down and determined to keep her hold upon herself. She was glad that it was time to begin the operation of dressing. The occupation helped to expend the nervous force within her. Besides, it was in itself a satisfying experience simply to dress in this pretty room where for almost the first time in her life she saw herself reflected from head to foot. She smiled at herself, coquetted with herself, even took time to dance a few steps up to the laughing image that also advanced pirouetting as towards a possible partner, simply to exult over the elegance of the trim, high-heeled satin boots.

When at a quarter before four Milly looked in she found Anita dressed, her eyes sparkling, and her cheeks just touched with rose color. The gown was charming; the older woman stood looking at the younger with her head on one side and with the smile of a connoisseur.

"I wish Mr. Breck could see you," she said.

"I am glad Mr. Breck is hundreds of miles away," cried Anita. "He is too humdrum, too precise, too everyday. I don't wish even to think of him this afternoon. He wants me to fail; I fear he is selfish."

"You spoiled child!" said Milly. She could

have shot a rejoinder with all the force of her indignation, but that the pretty creature must be humored, — pampered. She was conscious of a tumultuous rush of sensations. "Don't you know that the way to sing is to feel?" she said, putting her hand on the girl's shoulder. "Forget yourself and your personal ambitions; let your heart speak."

"I do not dare," retorted Anita, laughing. "It is so important to keep myself quiet."

"The people will be here presently," said Milly. "Come down to the library. Mr. Contarini will be one of the first, I suppose. I shall leave you to him."

They went down the private stairs together, and entered the empty library.

"I suppose it is best for you to be alone," Milly went on. "I must go and speak to the musicians; I have to speak to everybody. Sit down. No, not there; you may rumple your muslin. We women have to make these sacrifices."

Anita perched on the edge of a chair, and waited. The twang of a distant violin reached her ears; she knew that Mrs. Childe was to have a band playing in the conservatory while the people gathered. The drawing-rooms were lighted as if it were evening, but beams from the low sun blazed here and there through the hall windows, and broke resplendent upon brass, crystal, and silver. The library was dark, except for the bright fire. Now and then a coal fell, and it

startled Anita, to whom each second appeared an hour, and who, in five minutes, felt, like a child in a dark room, as if she must find a warm, familiar touch, or must go mad.

The band had begun playing a nocturne of Chopin's, — delicately sad, full of perfume, of suggestion, of memory. The strains did not wholly drown the sounds of arrivals in the hall; there were murmurs, rustles, voices.

Anita heard some one coming towards her, and, looking up, saw Geddes Poorshaw. She stretched out both hands to him.

"Oh, I am so glad to see you," she exclaimed. "I had begun to feel as if I must have some one to talk to, or must scream at the top of my voice."

"Mrs. Lee Childe said I might come," said Poorshaw. "She sent word to you that a great lady had seized Mr. Contarini, but that he would be here presently."

"I do not care particularly about Mr. Contarini," said Anita. "I felt myself getting frightened, nervous, afraid of the people. I am glad the band is playing; the blood begins to stir in my veins again."

"A woman needs to be strong as a horse to sing," said Poorshaw.

"Delightful comparison!"

"True, all the same."

"Birds sing, yet are so frail that you can crush them in your hand."

"I give up. You, at least, are more like a bird than like a horse; yet a horse is the most nervous of animals."

"Except a woman."

"Don't be nervous. Oh, how I hate this! When I think of all my sisters, and aunts, and cousins out in the audience ready to stare at you, I am ready to cut them all."

"Can I pass their criticism? How do I look? Do you like my gown?"

"Like it? Don't you see I am keeping myself under lock and key, as it were, — that I don't dare utter a syllable of what I long to say?"

"Why not? I long for a little encouragement and sympathy."

"Here is encouragement and sympathy in concrete shape," said Poorshaw, still bending close over her, and now throwing a little box into her lap. "You told me once about a girl who created a perfect furore by singing in some drawing-room abroad; that all the women crowded around her and pressed their bracelets and diamond brooches upon her. I came prepared to do the same, but may as well give you my little offering before the event."

She uttered a soft cry as she tore the casket open.

"Oh, how superb!"

"Put it at your throat," said he; "it will suit your toilette."

"Can I? May I? Ought I?"

"Of course you can; you may, you ought, you might, should, and must," said Poorshaw, laughing.

She held up the glittering ornament a moment to watch the play of light across the facets of the six small diamonds set about a large one of wonderful whiteness and brilliance; then, with an air of childish contentment, she thrust the pin through the fluffy white frill at her throat.

"I ought to sing well," she said triumphantly.

"That everlasting voice! you think of nothing else."

"I dare say you would like me better if I had no voice."

"It would be a hard matter for me to learn to like you better. By Jove, how that becomes you!"

"I wish I could see myself!"

"I almost wish I could not see you," muttered Poorshaw.

"I shall probably sing the Jewel song; that is, if Mr. Contarini is sure of my voice," said Anita. "I should like to try it this moment, for I know what that ecstasy means. I am fairly tipsy with delight over my new clothes and these diamonds. Are these my own, — my very own, — to keep, no matter whether I succeed or fail?"

"Yes; lay that comfort to heart, — all that I can give you will be yours whatever happens."

He said this with an intensity which, even at that moment, when she was carried away with a

thousand ambitions rolled into one, burned its meaning into her brain. She did not reply, for Mrs. Childe and Contarini had entered, and, rising, she ran towards them.

"She is too pretty," said Contarini, striking his forehead, with a comic gesture of despair. "I know that look; she cannot sing to-day."

"Oh, you croaker, — you prophet of evil!" cried Anita in the highest spirits. "I am going to sing beautifully. I am so happy, so delighted with myself; I am certain I shall sing as I never sang before."

Milly had beckoned Poorshaw aside. She had observed his look, his attitude; and her quick eye had discerned as well the new flash of diamonds at Anita's throat.

"Thank you," she said, "for filling up the tedium until Mr. Contarini came; but I suppose that now he will have a thousand last orders to give. He is horribly nervous about her voice."

"I always tell her she ought not to care a button whether she sings well or not," said Poorshaw. "A beautiful girl like her has other strings to pull."

Milly gave him an arch glance. "I wonder if you are yet aware that this beautiful creature is actually engaged," she said lightly.

"I don't mind telling you, Mrs. Childe, that if I can compass it, I intend that she shall shortly be actually engaged to me. I have been waiting until this excitement is over."

"I do not pretend to be anybody's keeper, but I am Miss Rivera's chaperon to-day, and I think I ought to tell you she is engaged to marry Mr. Sidney Breck."

"You are quite mistaken; they are old friends. I dare say she flirts with him. She is a born coquette" —

"A born coquette, very likely; but Mr. Breck was before you, and he loves her, — rests upon his expectation of marrying her. You are too honorable and too good-hearted, Mr. Poorshaw, to rob him of the girl he loves, — to tempt her with magnificent gifts."

She was conscious of the savage gleam in his eyes. "However," she went on, "people's love affairs are not at present my concern. What I must do is to make this affair pass off well." She went to the door and called Mr. Norreys, whom she saw standing at a little distance, perhaps combating certain memories which in that house rose and looked him in the face. "Mr. Norreys," she said in a wheedling tone, "I want this affair to go off in just the right way. It is not a concert with the audience in rows, you know, but presently a pianist is to come out and play one of Liszt's fantasias. That is to be the signal for everybody to sit down; that is, half a dozen men will bring in chairs, and people can at least have the opportunity of sitting down. Next, there is to be a duo for a violin and the piano; and, finally, Miss Rivera is to be led in to sing to us. Let me introduce you to Miss Rivera."

Mr. Norreys pressed forward with his best air.

"Mr. Norreys is to lead you in," Mrs. Childe said to Anita. "Whatever Mr. Norreys does succeeds, so I am begging him to throw his ægis over you. Now this is my idea: When the first song is over, there will be some applause, and then, under that inspiration, a second song; and after the second song I want an interlude. Everybody must be presented to Miss Rivera, and, Mr. Norreys, I appoint you master of ceremonies."

Mrs. Childe went back to her guests, leaving Mr. Norreys flushed with a sense of his responsibilities. Perhaps, who knows, he experienced the hope that, grown wiser, Mrs. Lee Childe was relenting, now that she found out her actual need of him. At least, from this moment, he threw the whole might of his influence into the scale, determined to achieve a success for Milly Childe's protégée.

The hostess returned to her guests, moved about, skillfully grouping the right people near the rear drawing-room, the floor of which was raised a few inches. The band, which had been playing Chopin's waltzes and nocturnes, ceased. The pianist appeared, bowing, near the grand piano, and each person looked about for the most comfortable seat attainable. How charming it was! was the exclamation on all sides. What a happiness to be freed from the *gêne* of a concert room. Here one could listen and feel, — that is, one could listen without feeling, experiencing simply comfort and the plea-

sure of watching one's friends seat themselves, arrange their attitudes and their draperies, put on a serious air of intense appreciation, and then lose one's self in a reverie from which one only emerged at the close of the performance. Milly herself suffered, and turned hot and cold by turns, fighting, as it were, with a nightmare, while assuming smiles, nods, and the rest of it. She was in no mood to resign herself to the melodious passion of the duet, but was intensely eager to have the introductory part over and to see Anita advance. And at last she was led out!

Mr. Norreys had arranged the small effects like the consummate master of details that he was. As the young singer came forward everybody was startled by her beauty. What youth! What distinction! What charm! She was supported, too, by Mrs. Bernard-North, Mrs. Fletcher, and Mrs. Crooke Poorshaw, — just the setting to enhance the worth of a brilliant whose actual market value has not yet been tested.

Anita advanced, hesitating and timid, and stood with her delicate ardent face, her charming figure, her spontaneous youthful grace, detached, as it were, from her surroundings, — a picture complete in itself. She seemed to notice no one; not a blush came to her cheek, not a quiver to her lips. Yet how, in spite of this very repose, fire and restlessness burned through her as a flame through crystal! Milly's own sensations seemed heightened to agony by her instinct of the intense feeling in the

girl. Contarini was to play the accompaniments. She was to begin with Mignon's song. Milly scarcely breathed while it was gone through note by note. Anita had sung it to her the day before, making the poetry and charm of it vivid, bringing her face to face with the sad, passionate soul of Mignon. To-day, instead of a heart full to overflow of intensest music, and a bird's impulse to pour it out in rapture, it seemed to Milly that the girl was a mere mechanical puppet. However, it was evidently the mistake of her own jealous, critical ears, which listened with senses strained beyond their limit, for the moment Anita paused an irrepressible outburst of applause burst forth. Milly heard from every lip with surprise and delight, "Marvelous!" "What a bird-like quality, yet what feeling!" "And so young, you say!"

Milly caught at the phrases with sudden rapture.

"And is she not lovely?" she said, beaming. "She is descended from a French marquis who emigrated to Porto Rico during the Terror. One sees the French look in her forehead."

This was all that had hitherto failed. Milly said it to her next neighbor, her next neighbor passed it on. Twenty-two people knew the delightful fact before a "Hush" ran round, with the intimation that the descendant of the French marquis was to sing again. Although the sincere individual judgment had been that Anita sang very well, the impression had needed to be fixed in order to make itself actually felt. Now eyes had seen,

ears heard, and the heart of each woman conceived the idea. Anita in her second and more ambitious aria was listened to with a sure admiration which rose into a crescendo of rapture to its irresistible climax, although instead of striking and sustaining her voice on G sharp, as it was her intention to do, she encountered and lingered on the wrong note. Hearing this, both Contarini and Milly bent themselves double, crushed, stricken, suffering, as if never to rise again.

"Oh, hopeless, hopeless, hopeless," said Milly to herself. "He was right. She is not a musician, not an artist. She sings well only by a lucky opportunity." It flashed through her mind that she had exposed Anita to this terrible mortification, this cruel reverse. She did not dare once to raise her eyes until the last note of the song. The end of things had come, she felt, and her brain was busy in concocting verbal plausibilities, explanations, apologies.

But in another moment all the guests had risen as by a preconcerted plan. Milly had missed a tableau. Mrs. Crooke Poorshaw, who had a lively soul and was passionately fond of whatever she liked, had darted forward and embraced Anita. Mrs. Bernard-North had followed suit, each member of the nearest group pressed close with felicitations, and to have been cool and critical at such a moment would have been to commit an absolute rudeness. Anita had had her unhappy moment. Then Mrs. Crooke Poorshaw had embraced her,

and the spring of her felicity was proportioned to the depth of her interval of despair. She gave a sigh of relief as her bent and crushed forces regained their equipoise. She looked not only happy, but ravished with happiness when Milly went up to her. She was on a pinnacle, but it was the pinnacle of which she had so long dreamed that she took it gracefully. Compliments buzzed about; not finding the ear of the young queen, those outside the inner circle echoed to each other the phrases current among the initiated, who had always something felicitous to say at the right moment.

Contarini had retreated into a corner, where he glared wrathfully. Milly went up to him.

"I wash my hands," he said with a practically illustrative gesture. "I wash my hands."

"I was horribly afraid she was doing badly," said Milly; "but all these people seem to think" —

"All these people, — I care not if it is one tousand, ten tousand people! *I* know that Miss Rivera made a fool of herself. I see now that it is all no use, — she cannot sing. It was my foolish hope, my mad vanity, to make a genius where there is no genius at all. She is quick, clevaire, and three days out of the seven she has a voice. But the other four days! then she is a different sort of a bird. I have thrown away time, I have thrown away money, I have thrown away deep feelings of my heart on this ill-justified ambition. Oh, useless flapping of the wings when it is a mere

barnyard fowl, — no divine bird with power to soar into the heaven."

Milly listened with doubt and amazement.

"Oh, Mr. Contarini," she said deprecatingly, "she can sing so beautifully at times. Yesterday, now, how sure we felt of her."

"The fault is in herself," Contarini returned. "She is made of another stuff from an artist. I wash my hands, I shake the dust off my feet. I have no more time, no more strength, no more heart to waste on fiascos," and in spite of Milly's entreaties he walked straight out of the house, leaving Anita to her fate.

Anita's fate, however, seemed not to be dependent on Signor Contarini. She held her fate in her own little white hands. She was entreated to sing again, and when, after the Italian could nowhere be found, Milly suggested, "Perhaps you can play your own accompaniments," Anita, with apparent timidity, with blushes, with half-frightened, lovely eyes, sat down, and played and sang song after song. It was delightful to watch the transformation of the charming child to a woman. Her natural grace carried her through even when she bungled, for she had the instinct to turn back to a friend, to reinforce herself by fresh aid, in a word, to put charm and coquetry into the mischance.

If Milly had been for a time wretched with the sickening conviction that the singer had failed, the tension of her mood gradually relaxed. Anita

evidently did not mourn. Was it that she rose secure against apprehension of failure, soothing her nerves and satisfying her ambition with the belief that love was enough? Or was it that she was after all a mere charlatan, accepting a cheap success, and floating blissfully on the flattery of a roomful of people who liked a new sensation?

"Dear Mrs. Childe," said Anita, clinging to Milly, when, her ovation over, she was going away, "I never was so happy in my life. I can't thank you enough. I never expected to be quite so happy."

XIV.

THE next day at three o'clock Milly knocked at the door of Mrs. Hugh Rivera's apartment, and was admitted by Miss Rivera herself, who, on seeing her, exclaimed with dismay, —

"Oh, Mrs. Childe!"

"What is it?" said Milly anxiously. "I have been expecting you all the morning, and not seeing you felt restless and tormented, and accordingly as soon as luncheon was over set out. You are not ill."

She took the girl's hands and looked into her face, seeing an expression there she was puzzled to divine: at once saucy and frightened, tremulous and triumphant.

"Oh, no, I was never so well in all my life," said Anita. She drew her visitor inside and closed the door. "I may as well tell you," she went on, laughing and blushing, "that I am a little bit afraid of you. Indeed, I have just sent Mr. Poorshaw to break a piece of news."

"A piece of news? Mr. Poorshaw?" repeated Milly as if incredulously.

"I have promised to marry that individual," explained Anita, still laughing. "You see I make it no secret. His sister-in-law brought me home in her carriage last evening, you may remember, and

when I entered this room here he was waiting for me. He had come by train. He declared that he was tired of shilly-shallying, — that he had not wished to assert himself until the musicale was over, but now that it was over he must have his answer."

"And you promised to marry him?" said Milly in a low, but indignant voice. "Although you were engaged to Sidney Breck you promised to marry Geddes Poorshaw?"

"He spoke at the right moment," said Anita. "I had come from fairyland into this dull, every-day life, and I was already longing to go back to fairyland. He gave me the chance. 'You see now what sort of a career I can offer you,' he said. 'Marry me at Easter; we will go to Europe, and next season I will bring you back to New York, and the ball shall be at your feet just as it was to-night.' He explained that my success yesterday was after all a sort of accident; but that it showed what I could do with a secure footing of my own in society."

"Have you no heart?" said Milly, with a straight gaze into the girl's face. "Have you no feeling, no apprehension of what you are doing?"

Anita did not blush, but said with a slight gesture of concession, "I knew you would take it to heart. That was the reason I begged Geddes to go and see you to-day."

"You were engaged to a man who loves you," cried Milly, — "a noble, charming, clever man,

who loves you! Do you know what an experience that is for a woman? It will not happen twice to you."

"I always insisted that I was not absolutely engaged to Sidney Breck," said Anita with spirit. "But I am now engaged to a man who loves me, who worships me even, and has the power to lavish everything upon me. He may not be wonderfully clever or charming, but he can offer me everything."

Milly smiled with a touch of irony in her expression. "Oh, I have seen Geddes grow up," she said. "Geddes is a sort of cousin." She checked herself, and her disdain warmed into sympathy. "Oh, child," she went on, taking a step forward, "I feel as if you were making a mistake. Can it be that you were disappointed, disenchanted yesterday? Perhaps you were wounded by Mr. Contarini's desertion. It seemed to me cruel that he should go away."

Anita uttered a little bubbling laugh, half like a sob. "I knew I broke his heart," she said. "I saw his head go down when I struck that note sharp, and for a moment I felt as if the end of things had come. Everything whirled round. I was surprised at myself for going on with the song, and really finishing up quite creditably. Nobody however, could have been more surprised than I was at first, to find myself in that seventh heaven, flattered, accepted, made a queen of. I was amused afterwards when Mrs. Poorshaw told me she knew

nothing of music except through her emotions." She paused a moment and looked at her visitor with a pleading smile. "When one cannot have what one wants," she pursued, "one takes up with what one has. I am tired of beating the air with my wings and not flying. I admit myself dismayed by the difficulties of an artist's career. I am going to take up a new profession."

"It must have been in your mind all the time yesterday," said Milly in a suffering voice. "You had on his diamonds."

"I see now," said Anita lightly, "that it really has been in my mind a good while. Probably the diamonds settled my fate for me."

A silence fell between them; then Milly began hesitatingly, —

"Have you" — but she broke off, growing scarlet.

"Have I told Sidney Breck?" said Anita. "Yes, I wrote to him last night. He is in Washington, but no doubt had the letter this morning." She was asserting her imperious self-willed personality against the rebuke in Milly's clear, scornful eyes, and strengthened herself every moment. "He is not so selfish but that he will be glad to have me do the best I can for myself," she went on. "He knows that I am ambitious, extravagant, that I hate everything dull, tame, and mediocre. He would never take me quite seriously when I insisted on my own fastidiousness; now he will understand that I was in earnest. I wanted

to be rich and great. I am not sure that I ever cared very much about art. It was simply a means. What most people call living, — the mechanical rotation, the everlasting coming back of the same duties, — I *loathe*. If I married a man who was poor and obscure, I should simply pass my days in feeling unsatisfied cravings, miserable jealousy and anger."

Milly listened with a feeling almost as if the props of her universe had fallen. Her impulse was to get away and find out what had happened to give her this blow. She said a few words more to the girl, kissed her, then took leave, her brain still whirling, still repeating the charge that the girl was false, the girl was cruel. Had she no heart? Breck had loved her and he would suffer. A great horror came upon Milly's mind at the thought of his suffering, almost like remorse for some misdeed of her own. She had to close her eyes on the agonizing vista of Breck's loss of hope, — loss of belief.

Then by turns she was angry with the girl, and it braced her like a tonic to say that Anita would suffer for her stupid vanity, her senseless egotism, her belief that everything in the system of the universe was created in order to pay her homage; that men were to be bidders against each other for possession of this inestimable jewel! She knew her own value, — with quick wit she had taken the suitor who possessed solid cash. Poorshaw was certain, however, to make a good bargain for him-

self, — a hard man, with the physique, nerves, and brain of an athlete, with the habit of domination, governing everything and everybody whom he lived with, and resolutely declining to live with anybody or anything he did not govern. Perhaps, however, each would meet his or her match in the other, Milly finally said to herself, remembering the fire in Anita's eyes. Gradually the inclination died away which had at first prompted her to go back to Anita, to put her arms about her, to implore her to reconsider, to say, "We are both women, and I am an older woman than you are, and I know what you will gradually find out, that any one of us born a woman is born a foolish child, — always to be a child, with a heart longing for love, for tenderness, for a kind hand to clasp and trust to. A woman's fate is made for her by the man she accepts. Oh, think what you are exiling yourself from."

This impulse passed away and what she did instead was to order an afternoon tea-service for Anita's wedding present, and then to leave town, promising to come back in April for her father-in-law's marriage. She went to her house in Berkshire, but late in March was called to her uncle in New Hampshire, who was failing and asked to see her. She stayed with him until his death, which happened just before Mr. Childe's wedding day; thus Milly could not attend the nuptials. It was said in New York that she would, as soon as the pressing business connected with her uncle's great

estate was settled, go to Europe for the summer. But instead she returned to the house among the hills for which Sidney Breck had once partly designed a new wing. The house was already large enough, with more rooms than Milly, even in her present mood of restless inactivity, cared to walk through. It stood high, surrounded by lawns, gardens, and a house-farm, facing the west, and overlooked a wooded valley through which a stream meandered. To the north and east rose the hills, solemn ridges dominating gorges, deep ravines, and a little lake. Towards this lake a mountain brook rippled singing with a sweet impetuous voice in its descent, and in one place flung itself boldly over a precipice, looking midway like a veil of fine gauze floating in the air. To this waterfall Milly was in the habit of walking in the long quiet afternoons with her dogs, and one day, just at the end of June, she was setting out, and had reached the foot of the grounds, when the dogs gave a sudden sharp bark, and she heard a step behind her.

She turned and saw Sidney Breck dashing down the slope, and when he reached her he was breathless.

"They told me you had left the house but a moment ago; they offered to send for you, but I said" — This he faltered, as soon as he was near enough to speak.

She was laughing at his haste and at his eagerness. His hat had tumbled off, and, regaining it, he had not put it on, and his hair was tossed

about; his eyes were full of light, his cheeks were flushed, and his lips were smiling. He was in a knickerbocker suit of gray tweed, and carried a knapsack slung across his shoulder.

"I am glad to see you," said Milly. "Where did you come from?"

"I have been walking through Berkshire County," said Breck. "It is only by the merest chance that I am here. Please understand, Mrs. Childe, that, as it were, I have stumbled upon you."

"Oh, dear!" said Milly. "I hoped you had come to build my wing. Not a day passes but I look at that side of the house, and think of that wonderful chimney, those gables" —

"Have you had any sort of presentiment I might come?" inquired Breck.

"Not a single presentiment."

"Surely you have fancied I might come," he said in a wheedling tone.

"I have no fancies," replied Milly; "no fancies whatever."

The dogs, at first impatient and restless at this delay, had fawned imploringly, but now crouched quiescent, gazing, with lolling tongues, at the two.

"Well," said Breck, "it had occurred to me that you had a place in Berkshire County, but I did not know what corner of the county it might be in. I heard in May that you were going to Europe; but it was borne in upon my mind, especially as I made a point of looking through every steamer passenger list, that you were not in

Europe, but here. So you see I had a distinct presentiment that I might find you."

"I am glad you had," said Milly frankly.

"And now that I see you," Breck went on, "I seem all my life to have dreamed of seeing you just here, with the golden twigs and stems and leaves, and solemn tree trunks behind you, the shimmering, beautiful afternoon, the dogs at your feet, the white gown you have on, the broad-brimmed hat. It is like enchantment."

"Had you not better leave your knapsack, and go to walk with me and the dogs?" she asked, not meeting his eyes. "Mr. and Mrs. Rutherford Childe are to arrive at seven o'clock to-night, and so I can ask you to stay."

"I have not come to stay," said Breck; "I have come to tell you something. I wanted to tell it quickly, forcibly, — without preamble, — and then go on. I see now that my ideas were a little dramatic. I did not want you to feel that I had forced myself upon your solitude. Yet my days and nights are full of you, — I can think of nothing else; and ever since Anita broke her engagement to me, I have wished to tell you how it happened that I had ever asked her to marry me."

"Surely," said Milly earnestly, "you loved her; that was the way it happened. I do not wish to hear of any possible perfidy."

"If she had been true to me," Breck went on quietly, "I would have held myself to every obli-

gation which bound me to her; but that was all over long ago. I went to her wedding, and wished her every happiness. I have had no pang to live down. I simply offered myself to her because, in mad folly, I wanted to prove to people that I was not trying to win the regard of a rich woman."

"You had not tried to win the regard of a rich woman?" asked Milly. A thrill ran through her speech.

"I loved a woman who happened to be rich," said Breck. "As to trying to win her regard," — his voice broke, — "I did not think of it; I only thought of loving her. It did not occur to me I ran the risk of being called a fortune-hunter."

"It seems to me you are very proud, Mr. Breck," said Milly.

"It seems to me I was a stupid coward," cried Breck. "I loved her. I have never loved another woman; I never shall love another woman. But simply because Ruff stirred up my vanity and rage, I cut myself off from the right to tell her that I loved her by pretending to care for somebody else, — by giving my sacred promise to somebody else." He looked into her eyes with an intense and penetrating gaze. "Emily," he said, "I wanted you to hear this from me, but I do not in any way try to justify myself. I made a foolish mistake, which has cost me dear. I cannot make any effort yet to repair it; I simply wish to confess it, and then to go away —"

"Go away?" repeated Milly in amazement. "Why should you go away?"

"I cannot come and tell you I made love to another woman, — was first accepted, and then jilted by her, — and then ask you to marry me, all on the same day," said Breck, as if with indignation.

"Exactly," said Milly. "I agree with you that the latter part would be entirely too much. 'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.' So, now, let us take a walk; we are just in time to hear the thrushes sing."

He made a little gesture as of despair. "I intended to tell you my story and walk off rapidly, vanishing in the distance before you could collect your thoughts," he said.

"The fine dramatic effect would be wasted on such a small audience; besides, I should feel so badly to see you vanish in the far distance," said Milly. "Come; there is such a pretty walk, and the dogs are so anxious to go."

He flung his knapsack on the grass, and together they entered the wood, where the thrushes were singing. The dogs ran on before, following up vague rustles, thrilled with the delight and mystery of chasing shadows, which looked alive and whisked like ears and tails; barking into holes in the boles of the trees with a fierce rapture of delight. Presently, from beneath tall chestnuts and oaks, which stood like sentinels, they issued again into the open, and looked across the valley

to the dazzling lights and solemn shadows of the range of hills. They passed beside the crystal pool, which imaged the blue heaven, the little fleecy clouds, and all the lovely golden and white and rosy things that struck sweet notes, as it were, among the green of the banks.

It was here they found wild strawberries, which they sat down and ate like two children, each picking for the other. They said little, but each word spoken seemed to let smiles and laughter loose. If one looked at their faces, one would have said that nowhere under the blue heaven that day were there two happier people than Sidney and Emily.

It was when they had eaten the strawberries that he found a wild rose, and, picking, gave it to her.

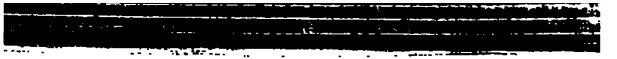
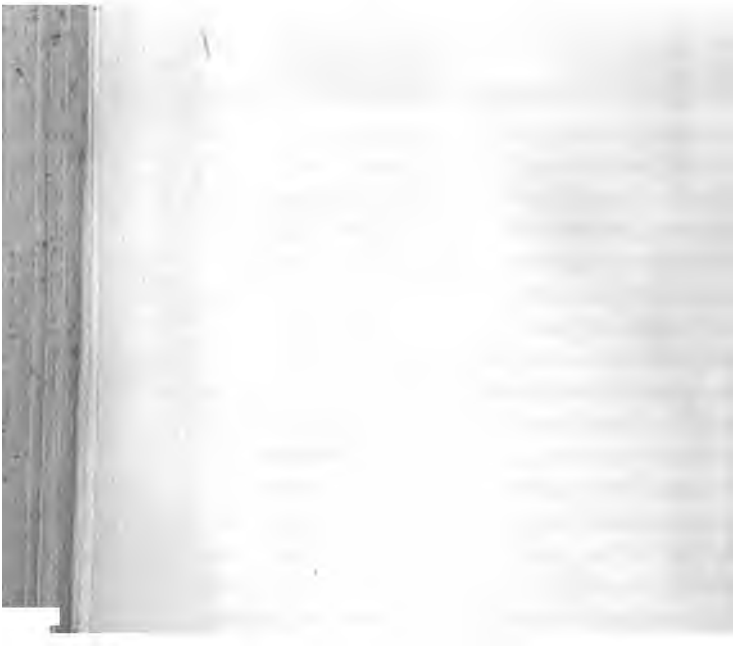
"Oh, thank you," she said, tucking it in her belt; and then, raising her eyes, she met his glance.

"I am so pleased that you will be here to meet papa and his bride," she said. "I am sure they are so happy; cousin Agnes has written such delightful letters. You know," — she said this with a sudden burst of confidence, — "I made that match. Was I not bold? I want you to tell me, when you see them together, that I divined rightly that they would be happy together."

"I can't stay," said Breck with a tragic air. "How can I stay? and particularly to see two happy people."

"Of course you can stay," said Milly. "Of course you must stay. The idea of your going away is ridiculous."

"But if I stay," said Breck, "I shall do what I did not intend to do. I shall ask you to marry me. I shall say what I expected not to have said until after weeks, months, perhaps years of stern probation, — that I want you for my wife; that, no matter whether you are poor or rich, little or great, far beyond me, above me, — no matter where, — I love you, love you desperately; that, before God, I will try to make you happy."

She did not try to answer, but after a moment, gazing into her face and seeing that her eyes were full of tears and her lips were quivering, he said, as if half frightened by his own joy, "Emily, my Emily!" and kissed her.

Then, while the afternoon lights shimmered and deepened, they walked home through the woods together.